

## This We Know: Promises for People of Faith & Doubt

### *The End is Life*

Revelation 21:1-6

July 21, 2024

I was recently in Scotland for a hiking trip. Alongside two friends, we were to take a spiritual pilgrimage on St. Cuthbert's Way. It was 62 miles that we planned to complete in five days. As one of you gently reminded us before we left, "Scotland has hills." I can confirm—Scotland has hills! On our second to last day, we were to hike 11 miles, and we were to end in the town of Fenwick. But 11 miles came and went, and there was no town in sight. It seemed we weren't getting out of the woods any time soon. We spotted, finally, on a distant road, a car off in the distance, and I picked up pace, feeling hopeful. My knees were tired, and I thought, *if I can just sit down, I'll be ok*. But it was then that I got my footing wrong. I twisted my ankle. I limped for a bit, saying, "I'm fine, I'm fine," trying to trick myself. We watched the dot of a vehicle drive away, not our cab. We tried to call the cab company. We had no service. We trudged on. A little while longer, we received a phone call. It was Scott, our driver. We shared our situation and that while we were hopeful because we had reached a road, it was sloping downhill, and my knees and my ankle weren't cooperating. He said, "Stop right there. I can come up that road." We saw a white van coming towards us. We waved our hiking poles in the air, all the hopes in our hearts. I was crying. And then as quickly as he seemed to be coming toward us, he turned. I was deflated. But then I heard it. *Beep. Beep. Beep.* He was backing up so that when he came up the hill to get us, he could make a quicker escape. He threw open the passenger seat door, set me down, elevated my foot. He did everything he could to help me out in my sad state.

I had thought our hopes were dashed when that first car drove off and when Scott's van turned. I shook my head and fatalistically said, "So this is where it ends." At one point I had thought I could will myself through the woods

and down the hill, but all I got was a temporarily twisted ankle. If our future hope depends solely on us, we'd all be metaphorically up a mountain without a cab. I wouldn't be telling this story, though, if that were the case, would I?

I tell the story because when we lose hope—or bet on false hope—we get the end of the story wrong. But by God's grace, it's right there that we hear John's vision, as if throwing the car in reverse (*beep beep*) reminding us that God is coming for us. So that's what I believe Revelation invites us to ask today: where do we place our hope? And what stories do we tell about our future?

This spring, perhaps like me you noticed an uptick in fatalistic news articles, things like: "The End of the Future," "Why We Gave Up on the Future," and "Is there a Future in the Doomsday?" We're like a man, George, who a friend once told me about after her grandmother's funeral. Her family referred to her grandmother's neighbor as 'Prying George' because he was always in their grandmother's business—and not in a friendly way. So much so that at her grandmother's graveside, George, though not invited forward, marched up before the family to place a rose on the casket. But George lost his footing, and I can empathize with George. He slipped underneath the casket and ended up with his legs partway in the grave. The priest pulled George out.

We, like George, can end up in graves not marked for us. Perhaps we crane our necks to stare at another's story or tap our fingers on our screens just one more time before bed to lull ourselves into a doomsday dream. And I fear our constant consumption of such news—particularly when not followed by meaningful, local action—I fear it's malforming our hope.

The world seemingly at our fingertips, we think the entire future is entirely in our hands, too. That we, or our best laid plans, or some persuasive leader, or a new wonder drug, or partner, or school for the kid, or recent escape plan, fill in the blank—we think these are our last great hope. And with that kind of outlook and a reasonable level of exhaustion, we might busy ourselves in our neighbor's business or apathetically resign ourselves to accept "The End of the Future."

Where we place our hope defines how we see our future, and it shapes how we live in the present.

John, the writer of today's scripture from Revelation, received his vision and wrote it down as a letter to the churches with which he could not presently minister because he was imprisoned on an island of Patmos in the Aegean Sea. This is a cave where he spent most of his days and is one of the sites where we take our young people on the spiritual pilgrimage, Footsteps of Faith. And the next day we typically take them to Ephesus as the locations are so close together. John, when he was imprisoned, he had previously been pastoring in Ephesus, and they are just 60 miles apart, across the water. Very sad, separated from his people. Give me a few days of dry land, and I could hike it. John could too.

Dry land is part of John's vision. The sea and the isolation and danger and separation it represents will be no more. I got a foretaste of this joy when, the day after my twisted ankle, we had the final day of the hike, and we were to make our way across the sand. But we had to wait as the water and the tide went out. And for a few hours in the middle of the day, we could make our way across the sand for the sea had been no more. And that sand, soft on my joints, did a miraculous work on my ankle. It was a foretaste of what is to come. In the end, there will be reunion. For John, for us.

John sees, too, that the city, Jerusalem, has been destroyed when John receives this vision. He knows that. But in this promised future John sees, Jerusalem is new, and it comes down from heaven like a bride adorned for her husband, because in the end, there will be restoration.

And this vision of the future has at its center John's true and abiding hope: the voice from the throne says, the home of God is among mortals.

See, for John our future hope isn't in the mortals getting it right. It's in God coming to us. John places his hope in God, empowering him to act in the present suffering to share that hope with others. God is the source and impetus for his hope and for ours.

Now I believe it bears naming today that we get Revelation wrong—a letter written to particular churches facing great persecution—when we try to line Revelation up with our present-day reality. We sort of act as casting directors, and we begin looking for who is the beast or what current event sounds like a stampede of horsemen. Please, Christians, don't trip and fall in that grave. Lift up your eyes. Look up. God is making all things new, including our propensity to point fingers and puff ourselves up. We aren't on the throne in John's vision. The Lamb, Jesus Christ, is.

The heartbreaking thing about scripture is our habit of trying to force it to fit our whims. But the compelling thing about scripture is God and how it tells us of God's surprisingly gracious and relentlessly loving pursuit of a people who keep throwing ourselves on the throne.

At the end of the day, where do you place your hope, really? What story do you trust to tell you about the future?

There are a number of compelling voices encouraging us to place all our hope in ourselves. Our very technology, with its algorithms oriented toward feeding us exactly what data determines will keep us wanting and affirm our sense that our will is being done. Or our front facing cameras making it easier to place ourselves at the center of every story. It reminds me of a time when I was visiting Princeton Seminary for an exploratory weekend to learn more about the seminary and trying to make friends with another person there for that weekend. I noticed as he told a story that it resonated with me, and I quickly said the quiet part out loud. I chimed in and said, "Yes, so back to me..." The rest of the weekend, whenever I began a story, Max would say, "Yeah, back to Gracie."

Back to me. Hard to live in a bigger story when ours is the only one we hear. I don't think I'm alone in this inclination of the soul. In fact, Ritual Design Lab out of Stanford recognized the trend true across our culture and has begun capitalizing on it. Ritual Design Lab aims to utilize behavioral design to "harness the power of products to trigger meaning for humans." Its founder is quoted as saying, "The whole premise of design is human-centeredness. It can help people shape their spirituality based on their needs. Institutionalized religions somehow forget this, that at the center of any religion should be the person."

No. I am here today because I wholeheartedly disagree with that statement. At the center of any religion worth its muster should be a God worthy of our worship. At the center of the Christian faith is a God worthy of our worship.

People of faith and doubt, hear this: We don't worship a god who ambivalently places creation in motion and steps back, saying, "You're in charge now, y'all figure it out." *Not this God.*

We don't worship a god who smugly shakes his head, saying, "It's a dog-eat-dog world. You can ignore the vulnerable and step on the weak in your efforts to get ahead." *Not this God.*

We don't worship a god who encourages us to forsake one another and fashion the whole world—and our religions—around our individual needs. *Not this God.*

So, if these false gods have left you feeling hopeless today, you're in the right place. If you look at the forecast of your life and our world and conclude that this is where it ends, that the future is bleak, please don't turn the story back to you, back to us, just yet. Lift your eyes. Look who is coming up the hill for you.

Which brings me to a true story. This God, the one worthy of our worship, John tells us, "Will dwell with God's people."

This God in Jesus Christ, as we often remind our children at their baptism, came into this world. He lived and showed God's love, suffered the darkness of Calvary,

and cried at the last, "It is finished." For you he triumphed over death and rose to newness of life. For you, he reigns at God's right hand. All this he did for you, little one, though you do not know it yet. And so, the word of Scripture is fulfilled. "We love because God loved us first."

This God goes running after us like a parent who can't stay away.

One preacher tells a story of a man sitting next to him on a plane. Trying to be friendly, the preacher asked about the man's screensaver of a newborn child. But before the preacher could put his headphones in and reverse course on his kindness, he was already experiencing quite the lesson in this Adam-ology, learning about this boy Adam, this newborn baby. The dad pulled out his tablet to get a better photo, to get a video. The father was delighting in showing the baby cooing, smiling, sleeping, spitting up, rolling over...

It moved the preacher. He asked how long the dad had been away. "One day," he said. "Longest day of my life."

"Where are you headed?"

"Oh, back home," the dad said. "I can't imagine being away any longer."

It struck the preacher: this is how God loves us, barreling through the sky to get back to be with us. The whole arc of scriptures testifies to the Creator, the Son, and the Spirit always chasing after creation. I can almost hear God saying, "I can't imagine being away any longer." That's the God we worship.

So, when you see, or if you see, articles for the doomsday or hear chatter of the end times, I hope you picture that dad barreling through the sky to get to baby Adam. Because the end of crucifixion is resurrection, the end of death is life, and the God we're invited to place our hope in has a history of making all things new and re-writing our anticipated endings for all of our good.

I get the endings wrong all the time. I remember one such time when I was completing my clinical pastoral education in a hospital. I spent a lot of that summer in

the neonatal intensive care unit sitting with families, holding babies. And there was one baby, Madeline, who was born at the hospital, but her birth mother would not be able to raise her. For weeks, I watched as the nursing staff and all the hospital staff held her, fed her, doted over her. She was healing and growing stronger, so they moved her to the progressive care unit. She would be ready to go home in a few days if a home could be found. We waited. We prayed.

And then one day I got a page. I hastily looked at it, and I saw Madeline's room number. But it said "urgent." I called the nurses' station. "Come quickly," they said. "Bring baptism supplies."

I knew what that meant. My heart was in my throat. And as I hurried through the halls, I wondered, *wait, who would have requested the baptism?* I got to the nurses' station and was stopped. I could see through the glass doors a couple leaning over her plastic bassinet. The nurse stood before me. "Gracie, it's good news." The nurse was trying to pull my gaze away from her room. "Madeline's adoptive parents have been approved. They want a blessing before they go. I misunderstood. Their church will baptize her later on. Sorry for my confusing call!"

I thought I'd known what that page had meant. I thought, somehow, we were losing her. And instead, I got to smear oil on that baby and her parents' foreheads. I got to hear how they were connected to the birth mother through church and that they'd gotten the call they had prayed for for years.

I had the ending all wrong, friends. The end, ultimately, is life. Reunion. Restoration. The end is God's love for all the world. For Maeve, for Romee, for Madeline, for George, for you, for me, for all creation. This is a God who is barreling through the sky to be with us, claiming orphans as God's own, wiping each tear from our eyes, worthy of our worship as God places us in God's family for our good and God's glory.

The end is life, and the life is the light of all people. Lift your eyes. Do you see it? Do you hear the beep of the car coming up the mountain? Do you see God barreling through the sky to get to you, to get to all of creation?

If you don't, it's not the end. Thanks be to God.