***ALPHA AND OMEGA***

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Texts: Revelation 22:8-13, 16-17, 20-21 and John 1:1-5

When I was an attorney, clients came to me for advice or representation in some legal dispute or business deal. I was the authority whose help they needed. But when I headed off to seminary in the summer of 1990, I was the one who needed help. The first class I took was Greek, and very quickly I learned that it is not a coincidence that an idiom for complete lack of understanding is “It’s Greek to me”, though in my case “It’s Hebrew to me” would probably be more accurate. Every Presbyterian minister is required to study Hebrew and Greek in preparation for ministry. At Union most first year students began with an eight week intensive course which is often referred to as “baby Greek”. In the space of a couple of weeks I went from being the sought out authority on legal issues to the novice learning my Greek ABCs – alpha, beta, gamma, delta… The professor was clear from the start, “The goal of this course is not for you to be able to order off the menu at a Greek restaurant; the goal is to be able to read the New Testament in its original language” – Koine Greek, to be specific. And so we began at the very beginning: alpha, beta, gamma, delta…

Those of you who were in a college fraternity or sorority probably already know a couple of Greek letters, though you may not know exactly where the Pi or the Kappa of Pi Kappa falls in the Greek alphabet. But any of you who have read the Book of Revelation know two Greek letters, and you also know exactly where they fall in the alphabet – Alpha and Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.

In John’s gospel Jesus chooses a number of I AM statements to identify himself:

I am the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep…

I am the way, the truth and the life…

I am the resurrection and the life…

I am the light of the world…

I am the bread of life…

In each statement Jesus offers a glimpse into who he is and what his ministry is about, using metaphors to which the people could relate. Some scholars have suggested that these I AM statements are rooted in that divine response to Moses at the burning bush when God says, “I AM WHO I AM”. The one who is the Great I AM is the one in our midst who is the shepherd and the light of the world and the bread of life – not literally but figuratively.

In Revelation we have yet another I AM statement voiced by the risen Christ who reigns in glory: *“I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.”* Three times in the vision of John of Patmos which we know as Revelation, this self-identification as the Alpha and the Omega is repeated, and one more time he is identified as “the first and the last.” The risen Christ claims the whole alphabet – from Alpha to Omega, from A to Z, from Aleph to Tav (for you Hebrew scholars). He not only was there at the beginning and will be at the end, he IS that beginning and that end, the first and the last, our starting point and our ending point in our journey through life and death.

A friend of one of my colleagues in ministry, Herb Isenberg, married a Chinese woman who was Buddhist. She began to talk with Herb about Christianity, searching for a starting point to connect Buddhism and Christianity. After several conversations and the passage of some time, the woman decided to join the church. As she did, someone asked her, “How long have you known God and Jesus Christ?” After some reflective thought she replied, “I think all my life.”[[1]](#endnote-1) Her experiences of God across her life were experiences of the one God who she came to know over time as the Lord.

God does not suddenly become involved in our lives once we have professed our faith or been baptized. God is at work in us long before we draw our first breath and long after we have drawn our last – for the Lord is the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end for all creation. The Lord is at work in the lives of atheists and agnostics, Jews and Gentiles, Muslims and Christians, Sikhs and Hindus. The Lord is at work in the lives of fervent believers and non-believers alike, for the Lord is God of all creation – God of all places and all people, whether they know God, or name God as Lord, or not. That was the message of early Christian missionaries to Native Americans who knew God as *The Great Spirit*. The good news the missionaries shared was that *The Great Spirit*, the Creator of all things, was the God who came to the world in Jesus Christ.

When we baptized little Aubrey today we declared that God has already been at work in her life, loving her and caring for her since her beginning. In the words of the French Confession of Faith that Emma read:

*And you little child, do not yet know anything about this, but thus is the statement of the apostle confirmed, “We love God because God first loved us.”*

Baptism is not the start of God’s love for us or the beginning of God’s work in our lives. Baptism is the public sign of God’s grace in which we have been embraced always by a loving God who is with us from the beginning.

In professing our faith we name that God as the Lord who made all things and all people, the One who came to us in Jesus Christ to save us, the One who has been at work across our lives day in and day out, whether we acknowledge it or not, whether we even know it or not. The revelation to John at Patmos is that the risen Christ is one and the same with that God – the Alpha and the Omega, present at the beginning and the end, the source of all life and all lives. As John writes in his Gospel:

*He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.*

Our lives begin and end in divine hands. So, we celebrate God’s promises for little Aubrey at the beginning of life and we celebrate God’s promises, as we did yesterday for Jo Whiteman, at the end of life, and we celebrate God’s promised presence with us all the days in between.

“Alpha and Omega” is the assurance that not only across our lives, but across all lives and across all time, God is with us, reigning over creation! To sum up the message of the book of Revelation in five short words: “In the end, God wins!” It is that assurance that sustains us when the world seems to have gone “to hell in a handbasket”. When evil rears its ugly head and ISIL seems unstoppable, when disasters strike or diseases like zika run rampant, when tragedies pile up or bad things happen to good people, John of Patmos urges us to persevere in faith with the assurance that the God who was there in the beginning is still with us today and will be there at the end – at the glorious, heavenly, hope-filled, triumphant end.

In the time between Alpha and Omega, between our beginning and end, we are called to be faithful,

to live and to love as Christ showed us,

to persevere in faith and in faithfulness come what may,

to worship God with joyful, hopeful hearts

as we look ahead to the Omega of time, praying, “Come, Lord Jesus!” It has been almost two thousand years since Jesus lived among us, almost two thousand years since he died and rose from the dead, and still we pray, “Come, Lord Jesus!” For two thousand years Christians have been waiting for him to return as he said he would return when he said, “Surely I am coming soon.” But no longer do we wake up wondering, “Might this be the day!” His “soon” is apparently not our “soon” and no one knows when that “soon” will arrive. So, instead of worrying or wondering about that day, we entrust it to the hands of God – to the same hands that hold us – and we dare to live with confident faith, with undying hope and with expectant joy. A story of faith that is our story

begins in the beginning when God created the heavens, the earth

and us

continues across a series of ups and downs, joys and sorrows, with God in our midst,

and ends at the end with these words of blessing with which the Bible and the book of Revelation end:

*The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all the saints.*

Saints are not just those miracle workers beatified by earthly Church leaders. One writer has suggested they are those who think about God when not driven by circumstance to do so,[[2]](#endnote-2) while another says they are “people who believe for us even on days when we cannot believe for ourselves.”[[3]](#endnote-3) They are those who understand that we live within the bounds of the Alpha and Omega of God, a space in which God is always present with us – always near, always available, always loving – on the best of days and on the worst of days alike. We are urged to join that company of saints, not by some extraordinary action, but simply by trusting in the God who came to us in Jesus Christ, the God who is with us from before the beginning until after the end, the God who is Alpha and Omega, the One whose story ends in Revelation with that blessing: *The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all the saints -*

with you and with me. Amen

1. Herb Isenberg, pastor of Westminster Presbyterian Church, Cedar Rapids, Iowa sharing this story in the *Is Jesus Christ the only way?* Seminar @ Union-PSCE, May 12, 2004 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. J. Ellsworth Kalas, *The Will of God in an Unwilling World*, Westminster John Knox: Louisville, 2011, p.6 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Walter Brueggemann quoted *in Monday Morning*, Nov.1, 1999 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)