

## THE FIRST WORD AND THE LAST WORD

*John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. Look! He is coming with the clouds; every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail. So it is to be. Amen. "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty. (Revelation 1:4-8, NRSV)*

In the tenth grade, I was assigned Ernest Hemmingway's *A Farewell to Arms*. I hated it.

The book tells the story of Frederic Henry, an American ambulance driver in World War I. He is wounded and falls in love with the nurse that tends to him, Catherine Barkley. The two lovers are separated by the war but eventually reunite one another, and Henry abandons his post as they flee to Switzerland. Catherine becomes pregnant but the baby is born dead, and soon she dies from complications from the birth. The story ends with Henry leaving the hospital and walking out into the rain.

When I finished the last page of the book, I closed the cover and angrily spoke out loud, "That was the worst book I have ever read." I complained to my teacher the next day, saying,

“Why did you make us read this book?” She responded unconvincingly with the comment that the book was a literary classic, as if that justified the misery she had inflicted upon me.

I responded so negatively to *A Farewell to Arms* for many reasons, chief among them is the fact that I do not like unhappy endings. I don't require everything to work out in the end; nor do I require all suffering in a story to even serve a greater purpose. I do, however, need something redemptive at the end, something that enables the characters to keep on living (and enables me as the reader to keep on living) in spite of the sorrow and pain they have endured. Instead of *A Farewell to Arms*, I prefer Scout's new understanding of humanity that she acquires, thanks to Boo Radley, at the end of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, or Sydney Carton's declaration at the end of *A Tale of Two Cities*, “It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done; it is a far, far better rest that I go to than I have ever known.” The suffering of the characters is not overlooked, but there is hope.

Over the years, I have come to appreciate Hemmingway's work, although I still do not care for his sparse prose, his emotionally detached masculinity or his outlook on the world. The rain that Frederic Henry walks into at the end of the novel is a symbol throughout the work of the anxiety that each of us can feel in a dangerous and uncertain world. His depiction of the horrors of war stands as an antidote to the glorification of violence so common in our culture. I may appreciate a little more *A Farewell to Arms*, but I still hate the ending. I still need something more than despair.

I suppose this desire for a happy ending is one of the reasons I choose to remain a Christian. As Christians, we are promised one. We are told that in the end there will be justice, suffering will end and peace shall reign. A cynic

might call this belief in a happy ending a psychological crutch for someone unable to deal with the world as it is. Maybe. I prefer, however, to think of it as guarded hope in the midst of a hurting world—a hope that does not ignore the pain of existence but endures in spite of it.

We are offered such a hope by today's scripture passage from the Revelation of John. Revelation, despite its mysterious symbolism and the way it has been manipulated by fundamentalists, offers us affirmations of God's sovereignty over time itself. It assures us that however and whenever this world of ours will end, God is still in control and God's love never fails.

We dip into Revelation on this Sunday, because it is the end of the Worship Year. Next week, we start afresh with the first Sunday of Advent and we begin our approach to Christmas. We move on through the year celebrating the life and ministry of Jesus, his death and resurrection at Easter and continue on focusing upon the work of God in the lives of believers throughout the rest of the year. We begin this liturgical calendar looking forward to Christ's birth and we end the calendar by reflecting upon Christ's eventual return at the end of time. This Sunday is called Reign of Christ Sunday, or more traditionally and less inclusively, Christ the King Sunday. Here at our church, this Sunday often falls just before Thanksgiving, and as you know we have pilgrims to celebrate, so it often goes unobserved. This year, the calendar falls differently and there's an additional Sunday after Thanksgiving, so we get to talk about this ending of the Worship Year along with the eventual ending of everything.

As I mentioned, Christian discourse on the end of the world is often dominated by the type of preachers and demagogues who twist ancient scripture to fit whatever world crisis is on the evening news on a given day. I'm content to leave such pointless speculation to those who love to revel in violent

and sadistic fantasies. Yet, there is a little voice inside of me that says we dare not leave all talk of the future to them. Hope is too important an asset to be thrown out with the bad theology of fear mongers.

Hope pours out of these first verses of Revelation, where John writes that everyone shall see Christ and grieve over his suffering here on earth. Some might interpret this passage as a promise that one day the world shall realize how the Christians were right all along and everybody else was wrong. I am not interested in such triumphalism. For me, this verse promises that the entire world shall recognize Jesus' pain, and thereby, everyone shall recognize the selfishness and violence that run like an unchecked epidemic through out world. I see this image of Christ's return as a means for all of humanity to realize that it brutalizes its creator with every act of violence, every war, every act of oppression, every program of ethnic cleansing and genocide. When all have this realization, then all shall live out the prophecy of Isaiah, "They shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more."

I especially like verse eight where God declares, "I am the Alpha and the Omega." On the first day of my introductory Greek class in college, I was taught the Greek alphabet. When I taught Greek in graduate school, I did the same thing on my first day of class. Nothing is more rudimentary than the alphabet. It begins with the first letter, Alpha, and ends with the last letter, Omega. By using the language of the alphabet—the most basic elements in communication, God states that the beginning of all and the ending of all is God. This is a wonderful statement, because with two letters, we learn that the same God that spoke our universe into creation out of love will speak its last words at its end, also out of love. The same God that declared Creation "good" and that

has sustained it all along will bring it to completion. This is good news, because through the eyes of faith we declare that no matter how difficult the middle time gets, our ending shall be the same as our beginning. We shall be embraced by the love of God.

When I perform a funeral, I speak of heaven often throughout the service. I do so not just to offer comfort for those who grieve, but as an affirmation of the worth of each individual. We are taught that God called Creation “good” and that humanity was created in the very image of God, so each person as a part of Creation is God-breathed—each person is worth something, no matter what they are told to the contrary. What makes each one of us who we are, our essential nature, our soul, is so valued by God that God never lets us go, neither in this life nor the next.

The same can be said of our entire world. Despite the view of many Christians in a creation that steadily degenerates until it is destroyed by God’s wrath, I believe the picture of God as Alpha and Omega points to a different type of future. God loves all of Creation enough that God will not let the goodness of Creation go when this universe ends. Rather than ending in a holocaust of fire or the “whimper” of poetry, the Omega of God—the last word—shall be like the first, an act of love by God.

This week I read Nelson Mandela’s account of being imprisoned for twenty seven years by the apartheid government of South Africa. Through it all, he somehow managed never to give up on hope. He writes:

I am fundamentally an optimist. Whether that comes from nature or nurture, I cannot say. Part of being optimistic is keeping one’s head pointed toward the sun, one’s feet moving forward. There were many dark moments

when my faith in humanity was sorely tested,  
but I would not and could not give myself up  
to despair. That way lay defeat and death.<sup>1</sup>

Although, to my knowledge, Mandela does not claim this hope comes from personal religious belief, I have to believe that hope of this kind—hope that remains despite all evidence to the contrary—comes from a divine source. The hope that God offers as the Alpha and Omega is one that enables us to keep our faces toward the sun and our feet moving forward.

In a world filled with war, genocide, corruption and exploitation, it is essential for people of faith to declare that the same God that created the world out of love has not abandoned it and will never abandon it. Despite the rain that we must walk through in this world, when the last word is written, we shall not be left to wander alone lost in our grief and despair. Our ending and the ending of our world shall be a happy one.

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The Congregational Church of Manhasset, New York,  
United Church of Christ

## PASTORAL PRAYER

Eternal God, Alpha and Omega, you are the beginning and the end of all that is. In a world filled with violent self-interest, we often feel that things are only getting worse and worse. Help us to have hope and to believe that you continually work in our world to bring it to a peaceful end. In our individual lives, each of us faces times of struggle and pain, when we feel that things may never get better. Help us to have hope and to believe that you are always with us. You have the first and last word over our lives and our world. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Nelson Mandela, *The Dark Years in The Impossible Will Take a Little While: A Citizen's Guide to Hope in a Time of Fear*, edited by Paul Loeb, (New York: Basic Books, 2004): 74.