

STAYIN' ALIVE

Spirit of Hope

Revelation 21:1-7

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The urban dictionary defines a “spoiler alert” as the act of giving away the ending of a movie or television series before another person has seen it. Just a couple of weeks ago I was at a small group meeting with a bunch of guys and someone started to talk about an HBO series that most of the guys love. Just a few words into the conversation someone yelled out “spoiler alert” because they hadn’t watched all the episodes yet. Twenty years ago I’d never heard that phrase before. Now, it stops a conversation cold. I’ve learned that few things will land you on the “persona non grata” list like being the purveyor of a spoiler alert!

However, there are times when knowing in advance how things will end is anything but a spoiler alert. In fact, there are times when knowing the ending in advance can be a gift. Last month I missed a stage of the Tour de France, and so I watched the re-run that evening on TV. Midway through the stage one of my favorite riders fell behind the leaders, but I wasn’t worried because I’d already heard that he made a remarkable recovery and won that particular stage. Knowing the ending kept me from losing hope.

With that in mind let’s turn to our scripture reading for today from Revelation 21. It’s a brief glimpse into the end of all things. I want share with you what it meant to the church in the first century, why it matters to us today, and how it’s anything but a spoiler alert. [Revelation 21:1-7 NLT]

Let’s start with the basics. What, exactly, is this ancient letter called Revelation – ‘cause if you’ve ever read Revelation you know that it’s a little strange. Some Christians have what I’d call a “Left Behind” notion of this final book of the Bible. Like the “Left Behind” book series, this perspective views Revelation as a detailed description of “the last days” when Jesus will return, the bad guys will get theirs, and the good people will go to heaven. But I think that’s a misunderstanding of Revelation.

Revelation is a specific kind of literature called apocalypses. You’ll also find this kind of literature in portions of the Old Testament books of Ezekiel and Daniel. While not common in our day, it was well-known to the first century audience to which Revelation was written. In the ancient world this type of literature was not primarily concerned with the future, but with the present. In fact, it’s most common purpose was to assure people that God was faithful despite the prevalence of evil in the world.

And that is certainly what the writer of Revelation intended. The Church in the first century suffered under incredible persecution. At best, they were ostracized from their communities. At worst, they were tortured and killed. Many of them, no doubt, wondered if they had made a mistake in becoming followers of Jesus. Maybe all their suffering was God’s way of punishing them. Maybe they should give up this Jesus-following business entirely.

The author of Revelation knew all this, and so he wrote this remarkable letter to encourage the early Christian community. If you rise above all the strange details and scary imagery of Revelation, you discover that the letter basically said to those suffering Christians, “God is with you. In the end, God wins against evil and, therefore, you will, too.” That’s not a spoiler alert; that’s a foundation for hope. It helped those early Christians to hold onto their faith even in the face of hardship and suffering. It helped them to carry on.

So, what does that have to do with us? Throughout this summer worship series called Stayin’ Alive, we’ve been talking about how the Spirit of God empowers us to be a part of God’s mission in the world, to make God’s dream for this world a dawning reality. It’s a dream called The Kingdom of God, and in this dream all people know that they’re loved and forgiven, because they’ve come to know Jesus. All people live in peace and harmony. All people know that they matter. All people have what they need to thrive.

And the moment that we make the commitment to partner with God in this mission, the moment we begin to work toward the realization of God’s dream, we encounter obstacles. We meet critics and naysayers. We run into politics and corruption. We become overwhelmed by injustice and problems that seem so much bigger than we are. And we become discouraged.

We grow weary. We begin to wonder if it's all worth it. We begin to wonder if perhaps God has given up on this great experiment we call the human race and are tempted to believe we're wasting our time.

That's why we need to savor these words from Revelation. We need to be reminded that God is with us. We are not alone. And on those days when it seems that evil is winning the battle, we remember that in the end God will overcome every barrier that stands in the way of God's dream for this world. God will make all things new. Knowing how it all ends gives us hope to carry on.

Imagine a boy, perhaps 10 or 12 years old. It's one of the first beautiful days of spring, warm and sunny. Outside all the kids in the neighborhood are choosing up sides for the first stickball game of the year, but this particular boy is inside. He's sitting at the piano in his living room because his mother said that if she's paying for lessons he's going to practice, and he's certainly going to practice before he goes out and plays with his friends. The boy likes piano, and wants to improve, but today he sits and he stares out the window longingly.

Suddenly beside him sits a man. We'll call him an angel. And the angel says to the boy, "I have something to show you." And suddenly the boy is transported to another time and another place. He finds himself in a great concert hall filled with people. Their attention is focused on a concert pianist who sits center stage, fingers flying across the keys, making music unlike anything that young boy has ever heard. After a moment the angel asks the boy, "So, what do you think?" All the boy can utter is, "Wow." To which the angel replies, "That's you in 15 years. Now get practicing." And suddenly the boy finds himself back in his living room, sitting on the piano bench, with a whole new hunger to practice.

Our vision calls us to collaboratively provide hope and wholeness to all people south of the river, with specific emphasis on children, seniors and people in poverty. Do you see how that vision ties into God's dream for the world? It's a big, bold vision because God's dream for this world is big and bold. We are alive with the Spirit of God, but that doesn't mean the work will be easy. When we're tempted to give up on this journey of following Jesus into the mission field of this world, Revelation gives us a glimpse of what will be. It renews our strength and gives us hope to carry on.