

Alive: God in the End

Revelation 21:1-6

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Earlier this summer, I hired a guy to help me with a small project at our home. It was the kind of project where I could be an extra set of hands if needed. So we're there, dinking around with boards and wires and stuff like that when he asks me what I do when I'm not dinking around with boards and wires and stuff like that. Now you have to know – and I think you do, because Jeff, Sandy, Jason, and I have all shared stories about how that question is the mother of all loaded questions for a pastor. But setting all of that aside, I just jumped right in and said,

"I'm a pastor."

"Oh! Where at?" he asked.

"Just up the street," I said.

"How many people are in your church?" he asked.

"A lot," I said.

"How many is a lot?" he asked.

At this point, I know that he's after something. We're well beyond small talk.

"It's more than some small towns in Minnesota," I said.

That's usually my go-to answer when people press me for a number. And it usually has the effect of slowing the conversation to a crawl as they try to get their heads around a church the size of some small towns in Minnesota. He was quiet for just a moment. Then, he looked at me, asked for a wrench, and asked, "Do you think we're in the End Times?"

Wow. Now that's a loaded question! But before I could answer, he began to recount a list of news items that were keeping him awake at night: the war in Ukraine, Supreme Court decisions, mass shootings, high gas and grocery prices, storms in Montana, wildfires in New Mexico, and, oh yeah, another new variant of COVID. It was an impressive list. And just as I was about to answer his question, he paused and said, "I can't wait until Jesus comes back to fix all of this. I'm done with it all."

It was one of those moments in a conversation where theology gets dumped out on the table like a 1000-piece jigsaw puzzle, and you're trying to figure

out if you will arrange all of the pieces by colors or straight edges.

Conversations about the end times are as old as history. People have been predicting the end of the world as we know it forever. Thirty years after the death and resurrection of Jesus, a small religious group known as the Essenes believed that an uprising against the Romans in Judea would be the final end-time battle that would bring about the arrival of the Messiah. It wasn't, and it didn't. In 847, a Christian prophet predicted that the world would end that year. It didn't. She later confessed that the prediction was fabricated to make money. She was then publicly flogged. Before his death in 1216, Pope Innocent III predicted that the world would end in 1284. It didn't. Michael Stifel, a German monk, a Protestant reformer, and mathematician who became an early supporter of Martin Luther, calculated that Judgement Day would begin at 8:00 AM on Sunday, October 19, 1533. The day came and went, and so did his freedom. When Stifel's prediction failed, he was arrested, put in jail, and dismissed as a pastor at his church. More recently, Jeanne Dixon, who, in one of the more famous photographs of her is seen holding a crystal ball, predicted that Armageddon would take place two years ago in 2020. She previously predicted the world would end on February 4, 1962. It didn't. Throughout time while humankind has been loudly predicting death, destruction, and the end of the world as we know it, God has been quietly calling people into "the Partnership of New Beginnings;" into everything life-giving, something worth knowing.

We find one of the earliest announcements of what God is up to in one of the most read but least understood books in the Christian scriptures, the book of Revelation. Revelation is a letter to a group of seven churches in Asia Minor, modern-day Turkey, with a powerfully hopeful message. It's a message, not about endings, but about the new beginnings into which God is calling us.

Revelation 21:1-6

[I saw...] Heaven and earth new-created. Gone the first Heaven, gone the first earth, gone the sea. I saw Holy Jerusalem, new-created, descending resplendent out of Heaven, as ready for God as a bride for her husband. I heard a voice thunder from the Throne: "Look! Look! God has moved into the

neighborhood, making his home with men and women! They're his people; he's their God! He'll wipe every tear from their eyes. Death is gone for good—tears gone, crying gone, pain gone—all the first order of things gone." The Enthroned continued, "Look! I'm making everything new. Write it all down—each word dependable and accurate." The Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

In the book of Revelation, John gives us a clear picture of God's vision of a world where hatred is overwhelmed by love, where injury is healed by forgiveness, where doubt is replaced with faith, despair is met with hope, where darkness is scattered by light, and where sadness is turned to joy. If that sounds somewhat familiar to you, you might recall the words of the prayer attributed to St. Francis, who, in the 13th century, made it his life's mission to announce that God, in the end, is always calling us into the Partnership of New Beginnings. The prayer attributed to St. Francis is well-known and beloved. So let's speak this prayer together: *"Lord, make us instruments of your peace: where there is hatred, let us sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy. O Divine Master, grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled as to console, to be understood as to understand, to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive, it is in pardoning that we are pardoned, and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen."*

This powerful prayer challenges us to live into the Partnership of New Beginnings. Let me give you three ways of entering that partnership.

First, God, in the end, calls us into the Partnership of New Beginnings by equipping us to push back against hatred by leading with love and responding to wrongdoing with forgiveness.

We learn early on to categorize others into two groups: those we like and those we don't like. It doesn't take much effort to "bin-sort" people into one of those two categories. It's natural, it's easy, and we do it without thinking. My mom, Joyce, must have been aware of me doing this as a kid. So she would often say to me, *"Always put the best construction on your neighbor."* The next closest corollary was, *"If you can't say something nice, then*

don't say anything at all!" It occurred to me that if I ever wanted to speak again, and if I ever wanted to be surrounded by neighbors, it would be important for me to work on that, to be open to God working on that in and through me. So while I am a work in progress and have a long way to go, in my life, paying attention to how and where God is drawing me into new relationships, new partnerships, and speaking with clarity about God's New Beginnings is the first step.

Second, God, in the end, calls us into the Partnership of New Beginnings by helping us to embrace and even welcome doubt as the doorway to deeper faith and where despair is transformed by the power of hope.

In his book *Wishful Thinking*, Frederick Buechner writes this about faith: *"Whether your faith is that there is a God or that there is not a God, if you don't have any doubts, you are either kidding yourself or asleep. Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving."*

When doubt is not allowed, discouraged, or even linked to weakness or failure, despair can rob us of experiencing a more meaningful life. Doubt is a normal function of the human condition. The argument can certainly be made that doubt can save your life in some cases. Doubting that you might be in danger when a tiger is waiting in the bushes can be a costly response. But when we welcome doubt and embrace it as a way of learning and growing, it keeps us moving. I suppose it's like ants in our pants, there's no sitting still and we begin to lose a sense of wonder and curiosity in our lives. I spend a good amount of time working with young people in their twenties and thirties. Many conversations have to do with what it means to be spirited – not spiritual, but spirited (because there is a difference). We talk about how to use our creativity, how to be more present each day and moment, why practicing gratitude affects our generosity, and how that illuminates our mission. I'm learning that there's a new generation of people willing to step into the partnership of New Beginnings wanting to give voice to doubts, questions, and wonderings. This new generation is doing this in the context of safe, small group conversations where people discover that every one of us has doubts and that those doubts fuel the fire of hope and new life. When I reframed doubt as a normal step in my own personal growth, I

began to experience a new kind of freedom, a generous curiosity, and growth in faith.

Third, God, in the end, calls us into the Partnership of New Beginnings as the living Word of Christ shines through us to illuminate the darkness around us.

This much we do know: because we know this good news that God has moved into our neighborhood because God is making his home with us, that we're God's people; and God is our God, and because God is making everything new, we're set free to walk into the Partnership of New Beginnings for the sake of the whole world. In the book of Revelation, John has a vision of God making everything new. What that means for you is that God is up to doing something new in and through you. What was is no longer. The God who created and still creates you, knows you, loves you, treasures you, and calls you by name continues to be with you making everything new! And me too!

So there I am with the guy I hired to help me with a small project at our home. We're dinking around with boards and wires and stuff like that, and he asks me if I think we're in the end times because he's worried sick about just about everything. I wanted to be the light of Christ in his life at that moment. So, what do you think I told him?

If you think I said "Yes, we're in the End Times," then you understand that there are endings for all of us every day. Relationships end. Jobs end. Projects end. Vacations end. Summers come to an end. Life ends for someone every hour of every day and has since the beginning of time. But what does not end is our hope in Jesus Christ. And Jesus is the embodiment of God doing something brand new in and through each of us. So we live this day, just this one day, in Christ who is the light of the world in and through us.

If you think I said "No, we're not in the End Times," then you understand that there are new beginnings for all of us every day. Each day is a new beginning; relationships begin, new jobs begin, new projects begin, new vacations begin, and new seasons begin. New life begins again and again. When we live with hope and expectation, grace and curiosity about what God is up to, we can walk into the Partnership of New Beginnings and embrace the promise from Revelation: *"The One seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new ... write this, for*

these words are trustworthy and true ... It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end."