

I remember one summer when the girls were about 3 and 5 years old, I was given discount tickets to a movie matinee and the show was the popular children’s movie: “The Never-ending Story.” The only problem was that the movie was so imaginative and creative and scary to them that they couldn’t bear to stay through it. So we left. For many Christians, the Revelation to John is just as frightening. In my early religious upbringing there were many songs that referred to the judgment expressed in this book, such as “Are you washed in the blood, in the precious blood of the lamb?” This was a great song of invitation or perhaps you know it as an “altar call.” Sometimes we’d just keep singing it over and over, because we were sure that someone needed to come down the aisle and be washed in the blood of Jesus through the rite of baptism. This is a different understanding of baptism from what I believe today.

Revelation is not a book that mainline Protestant churches like to preach on very much. But of course, in recent years it’s gotten lots of press. TV shows and movies are inspired by its rich imagery, and it is quite remarkable that people take for granted these fictional spin-offs as actually relaying some truth from the Revelation to John, but they are far from the truth of the text or the signs of John’s time and place.

When Allison was about a sophomore in college, she called one day because she and her roommate had been having an intense discussion about Revelation, and Allison wanted factual support for her viewpoint. After retrieving all that I could remember, I told her that grandpa Stan had taught a class on the book, and I would ask him to write her a letter. And so he wrote a six page overview of Revelation to his granddaughter, and last Wednesday, he and I reviewed some of the book’s major points. If anyone wants a copy of the Stan’s letter to Allison, with their permission, I’ve made a few copies that are on the back table.

Revelation was written in the decade of 90 AD while John was on the isle of Patmos, a prison island of the Roman empire. This John was not the same as the John who wrote the gospel, but he seems to be prominent in the early church because he knows details about the churches, and he writes this letter to encourage them as they faced brutal persecution by the Roman Caesars. Like other literary genres, such as poetry, fable, parable, etc., Revelation is a literary genre that is defined as apocalyptic. Apocalyptic literature is written for people in dire circumstances, for a people with little hope and likely facing imminent death. These are words for people at the brink of chaos. These folks are in moments of grave consequence; and the future looks dark. Will they prevail? Will anything good come of the chaos? Who is ultimately in charge of this world in which they find themselves suffering beyond measure? So Revelation is not about a vision of the future but a vision of the spiritual reality of the present, expressed in dreamlike images to give hope to the people of God.

So with great courage and determination John and Christians like him face the evil empire of Rome and rather than confess Caesar as Lord; they say Jesus is Lord; and many are martyred, and in their martyrdom their faithfulness gives them something in common with Jesus who also was faithful unto death. They become washed, cleansed, purified by giving their lives for the One in whom they have believed. Knowing that he is writing to many Christians who will die, John proclaims that death is not the final victory. There’s a never-ending story of faith and courage. They have been through the ordeal of Roman persecution, all the while holding on to the belief that at the essence of this world and of human history, in spite of all the evidence that surrounds them, God is in charge. These great witnesses remind us that they and we are one small

moment, a precious moment to God and to us, but only a fleeing moment in the great multitude of humanity and life that inhabitants this creation. We all belong to God; from God we become; to God we return.

These multitudes come to worship and praise God because they will never be hungry again, their thirst will forever be quenched, they will not be subjected to scorching heat or the blazing sun. Nature will cooperate with God's redeeming grace. God will guide them to springs of water of life, soothing water. This is the opposite of drought conditions for the soul. This is completion, perfection, and peace. And furthermore, God will wipe away every tear. All these images come together to say that God is the loving creator that is constantly and forever inviting creation to wholeness, to harmony, to fulfillment. These are fighting words for people who find themselves in a point in history where they must take a stand; they must tell the truth to their captors. There's too much at stake for them to recoil in fear; and yet, theirs is a never-ending story and there are more chapters to be written. We are part of the subsequent chapters, and it is with gratitude for our spiritual forebears who laid down their lives that we gather here in 2007 to witness to God's great story.

Revelation describes the world as it has been for a very long time, as it is now and as it will likely repeat itself to be in the future. There is chaos; and there's redemption. There are crises; and we bring the minds God gave us to try and solve the crises of our time, or at the very least, to name them for the evil they are, and to declare a greater power coming down. The earth is always experiencing the birth pangs of bringing forth new life. And our individual lives are often the same. Yet, life is to be celebrated, and the Creator worshipped, and we, too, find courage for faithful living of our days. Like the early Christians who lived in between the time of Christ and God's kingdom come; we live inspired by the community of past and present working diligently for this moment in time to make God's kingdom come on earth, as much as we possibly can and no matter the consequences for us personally. We dream God's dream so that God's dream becomes no longer a dream but a present reality.

Yet, in this time, we are not abandoned. We live life together in a community that says "yes" to God, and God is always reaching out to us like the beautiful Michelangelo painting of God's hand with finger outstretched so that we can glimpse the promise of a new Jerusalem, which is the city of God. And this point is especially important to grandpa Stan, because as he would say: "The author sees the highest fulfillment of human life as taking place in and through the greatest of human artifacts--the city. God is not out to annul human creativity and energy and community, but to fulfill it." God's fulfillment is not the naivety of the garden of Eden, a place of innocence; but a city, because the city is the metaphor for survival after innocence is gone. The city represents God and humankind as co-creators, each bringing their best, (albeit, God's best is more than ours), and together we move towards completion.

Well, there's that great movie line, when the woman looks at the man of her dreams and utters these words: "You complete me." It seems to me that Revelation tells the never-ending story that it is God who completes us. And this is a truth that always and will forever be, a love story without beginning or end, a never-ending story of God's love for you and for me. AMEN