

Revelation 1:4b-8

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.

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I speak to you in the name of one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Today is Christ the King Sunday. It’s an important week in the Episcopal Church. Our church lives in a weekly cycle of prayer, reading, and worship. We call it the “liturgical year” – over the course of the seasons, we experience the great story, God’s story, our story. Next week we’ll begin with Advent, the preparation for Jesus’ birth; then Christ is born (Christmas), and the gift of his presence is revealed (Epiphany). Then the baby grows up. He retreats in the wilderness and resists temptation, then calls others to account, too (Lent).

Then this man, Christ, enters Jerusalem. He is crucified, dies, and is buried (Holy Week), he rises from the dead (Easter), the Spirit descends upon the new community we call the church, setting them on fire (Pentecost). And then there’s a great big, long, glorious

stretch after Pentecost where we hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches through Christ's life and the entire biblical witness. And the whole thing, this accelerating train, reaches its last stop today. Today we choose to end the story with Christ the King.

John the Revelator told us this morning about this King. God, who was once a baby, is seated on a throne. He is "the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth." "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.'

The Alpha and the Omega! The first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. This is the Lord saying he's the beginning and end of letters, words, description itself. We know Jesus in his story, starting as the baby and finishing with the resurrection, but Alpha and Omega mean Christ is bigger than his time on earth, even before the manger, and farther after resurrection than we could possibly imagine. At the Big Bang and the end of time itself, that is Christ's Kingdom.

Today is a feast for celebration of that Kingdom. But there is something else bubbling, I think. I want to speak today, at the end of our yearly story, on the precipice of a new beginning, about the pain we experience living in the jumbled, messy letters between Alpha and Omega. The muck in the middle.

My favorite history professor from undergrad taught us that when a community makes a rule and writes it down, it's probably not because that's how people are already acting – usually, communities make rules because we *aren't* following them and need the reminder. That's really informed how I read scripture. God hands us this great story, filled with rules and guidelines and parables – not because we're naturally fantastic people of faith, but because we tend to step out of line and need the reorientation to God's will for us.

In fact, every part of the liturgical year is designed to re-orient us to God's story. Because we're flawed. We need the reminder. And today we need reminding that Christ is King – because it certainly

doesn't look that way in our lives a lot of the time. There are a lot of letters between Alpha and Omega – a lot of earthly leaders we rely upon daily for water, shelter, safety, health.

The irony of being human is that in our day to day lives, we rely on each other – and we are guaranteed to let each other down. It happens every election. If you're politically involved, you probably feel that pain most acutely when your least favorite candidate wins. You might, right now, be feeling grief, anger, pain, anticipating the harms of an administration you disagree with. But you aren't off the hook if your candidate wins, either; there has never been a perfect elected official, and the more responsibility a human being has, the more death-dealing harm they are guaranteed to commit. Because none of our earthly leaders are Christ. And yet, we need to lead each other.

You've probably felt this pain close to home. An abusive boss; a disappointing parent; a cruel teacher. We can all name someone from our formative years who taught us that adults are painfully,

harmfully fallible. We can all name someone who's sinning today – including ourselves.

Here's the truth of living in the middle of the Story, between the Alpha and the Omega. Over the course of our lives, we see every person invested with power – every person, no matter their spirit and aptitude – fail. Fail in profound ways. It's inevitable.

If you're anything like me, you look around at the world and ask: is there a hollowness to a day celebrating Christ as King?

You mean to tell me that Christ, God incarnate, the eternal Word, is Alpha and Omega, King of Kings - He came down from heaven itself to live with us in the muck. He came to dwell with us, struggle with us, yes even *die* with us. And this king didn't have the courtesy to rule us?

How dare he?

How dare Christ leave us in our own miserable freedom, to rule over ourselves on earth, to fail, to harm, to burn out, forget.

He is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end – and here we stand in the middle, between two promises: between creation and resurrection, in the valley of the shadow of death, in earthly kingdoms run by – always run by – broken kings.

In church, we speak about the Kingdom of God with great hope. Hope for what heaven will be like – when there are no more tears, nor crying, neither shall there be anymore pain, for the former things are passing away.

Or, we proclaim the inbreaking Kingdom. We live in the hope that he hath lifted up the lowly, that Christ the King hath cast down the mighty from their thrones, that justice shall roll down like waters, that we are living at the threshold of salvation here and now.

And hear me when I say – that Kingdom is real and true!

We know in our very bones, when you stand on a seashore and take in the vast oceans. When the rising sun casts its rays through your window and dust mites refract the light. When you hold a baby. When you give blood to a stranger. When you are hungry, and someone gives you food. When you sit in silence, swaddled in the warm love of the Spirit.

You and I know the Kingdom.

And we know it through scripture's witness. Christ died on a cross, a casualty of earthly Kings, and yet his story kept going. He rose from the dead, the first fruits of resurrection for *all* creation. Death no longer has dominion. We proclaim our hope each day because we will rise again.

Every year, every Easter, we catch a glimpse of beauty and life, the chorus of angels, the holy and mighty.

You and I know the Kingdom!

And yet.

Jesus died, rose, ascended, and never took earthly office.

We know God's Kingdom, and we also know this in-between life.

We know the pain of sins, whether committed against us, by us, or both.

So here, at the finale of our church's year, when we finish this run of God's story, you may be looking for Jesus to come back and rule us *now*. There may be something on your heart, a difficult question for God. You may be sad, or even angry, about the broken state of the world. I'm here to tell you you aren't alone. It's okay to feel that way. And here's why.

Remember that Christ is the Omega *and* the Alpha – the end *and* the beginning. This Sunday we celebrate the end, the Reign of God,

in order to enter Advent well as the beginning begins again. We'll come to church next Sunday with the right question: who is this King of Glory?

Unlike any earthly leader, who needs to prove how strong, how qualified they are, Jesus shows up as exactly the opposite. We enter God's story looking for a King – God enters our story as a naked, screaming infant. Emmanuel, God-with-us, is vulnerable. That gives us permission to be vulnerable with God, too.

So this Advent, bring your whole story to God. Because the Alpha and the Omega hold so much pain in the middle – pain Jesus knows well. Pray with the scriptures. Get to know the Kingdom Jesus talks about in today's Gospel. He says "My kingdom is not from this world." Find it in the Bible. And bring your anger, your sadness, your grief, to this vulnerable, infant, crucified, resurrected King who rules all nations. You are not alone.