

Romans 8:31-39 “The End”

Last week I asked you to take 20 minutes of your time to consider the possibility that the Book of Revelation is not a secret, coded roadmap to a predetermined end of the world, but a vision of a *hopeful future* where God makes all things new. In other words, “It’s not about the end, it’s about new beginnings.” This week’s sermon? It’s about the end of the world. “Oh now you’re just being contrary preacher.” Ok. I’ll own that.

Cameron graduated from Navy Boot Camp on August 31st and we had a great day together afterward. Cameron said that during Boot Camp, he volunteered to help the Religious Programming department. He said the job description sounded like what he often did here at First Christian Church, so he thought, “Why not?” But he didn’t just go to the Protestant church services. He went to an Islamic service too. He said he really appreciated the Imam because he was quick to point out that the brand of Islam that we often see in the news that’s committed to terrorizing the world is a corruption of true Islam. He said that true Islam is a very rational faith that embraces scientific discovery. Some religions get tied up in pointless arguments about whether we can even rely on science, but Islam is there to say, “Science and religion ought not to be separate.” Cameron said the Imam delivered a sermon that listed examples in the Koran that appeared to be far ahead of its time in understanding astronomy. But then again, what do you expect from a culture that gave us Arabic numbers, optical lenses and Al-Gebra.

Speaking of science, here’s an interesting piece of science trivia for you: Astronomers tell us that in a little less than eight billion years, our sun will turn into a red dwarf and Earth will be incinerated. That is if a massive comet or asteroid doesn’t take us out first. We could also get pulled out of orbit by a black hole or knocked out of orbit by a hypernova that originates somewhere else in our galaxy. And then there’s human stupidity to consider. We have the technology to destroy the earth many times over with our existing nuclear arsenal. And don’t get me started on poor stewardship of our earth’s resources and the

potential for global starvation. But ... here's where I'm going to get optimistic – Because we are who we are ... because we are innovative and have an uncanny knack for survival under pressure, we do have the potential of escaping Earth and populating other habitable planets. This is why we watch movies like *Interstellar* in Faith and Films! But even if we manage to find a habitable planet and figure out how to break the faster-than-light speed problem, scientists speculate that the entire universe is winding down. It will eventually end in either a big freeze or a big crunch, after which there will be nobody left to remember that any of this ever existed. And if this prediction is true, our unremembered lives will be gone forever ... utterly, absolutely, infinitely gone.

“You're kind of a glass-half-empty person sometimes aren't you preacher?” Well, just as I tried to give you some hope last week with Revelation, I'm going to find some hope in the midst of this gloomy-sounding science too. In the Bible, neither the big freeze nor the big crunch gets the last word. Instead, we are given a vision of a big celebration. From Genesis to Revelation we find the story of an infant universe into which is born, an infant humanity that grows, comes of age, makes mistakes, learns lessons, and finally reaches maturity. And like most coming-of-age stories, this one ends with a union, as humanity welcomes God into its heart.

So what does a story like that mean? What does it mean right now? Jesus gave us a clue in one of his best-known but least-understood parables – The Prodigal Son. In it, human history can be seen as the story of a family -- a father, and two sons. The family experiences conflict. The rebel son runs away and forgets his true identity. He hits rock bottom and comes home. He's welcomed by the father which causes problems with the older son. The father's heart reaches out to both brothers and he lets them know that they are both loved equally even when they don't love one another. And the story ends with a celebration ... a welcome-home reunion party.

What we don't know is will the older brother remain on the outside holding on to his resentments, or will he come inside and rejoin the family in celebration? I think Jesus left the story unresolved because we're supposed to root for that older brother. We're supposed to cheer him on: "Come inside! Don't hold back! Do it! Come!" Which, as we discovered last week, is the last word in these books we call holy scripture. "Come, Lord Jesus, come." When we hear this story, we let it do its work on us and we can look out from within it and see ourselves and all creation held in the parental love of God. We can empathize with God, who wants all to come, all to enjoy the feast, all to discover or rediscover their true identity in God's family and in God's love.

Again, this parable is the story of humanity! Both the rebellious and the religious can see themselves as the beloved creations they are and what a big heart God has when it comes to bringing people to the table. And as the church, we're all about bringing people to the table. We're about remembering Jesus and all he said and did to help us enter into God's great feast. We gather here at the table, we try our best to see one another with God's eyes of love and compassion as part of one human family. One big human family spinning around the universe on a planet that is eventually going to be knocked out of orbit, incinerated or be destroyed by our own hand. Daggone it preacher, could you not drag your obviously bad week into the pulpit with you on Sundays?

Stay with me. See, these astronomers who've made these gloomy predictions? They're going by information they've gathered using the limited tools at hand. They don't even have the right instruments to detect the widest, deepest dimensions of reality. It takes stories like the ones we find in our scriptures to help us imagine those dimensions. And yes, I used the word "imagine." It's okay to imagine. I was told once by a pastor that using imagination was dangerous and makes us vulnerable to being deceived by the devil. Hogwash. Imagine a moment before the Big Bang went "Boom." Imagine the creativity, the brilliance, the energy, power, glory, wisdom, wonder, greatness and goodness it took to express itself as the universe. Try to imagine a creative imagination and

energy so great that it would produce light, gravity, time, space, galaxies, stars, planets, oceans, mountains, valleys, deserts, forests, dolphins, goats, bobcats, bison, cardinals and gorillas. And, of course, us. And then dare to imagine that this is the great, big, beautiful, mysterious goodness, wholeness, and aliveness that surrounds us and upholds us even during our worst days. Finally, try to imagine that this is also the great, big, beautiful, mysterious goodness, wholeness, and aliveness into which all of us and all creation will be united in homecoming, in reunion, and in celebration around the table.

We use many words to name this ultimate mystery. God. Dios. Dieu. Thian-zhu in Mandarin, Mungu in Swahili, Allah in Arabic, Edoda in Cherokee. Elohim, Adonai, Jehovah, El Shaddai and a bunch of other words in Hebrew. Wakan Tanka in Sioux and so on and on forth. Think of all the books that have been written to describe and define this mystery. It's sad that so many arguments, inquisitions and wars have been waged over this too. But when we read through scripture, we see that the whole story of God's relationship with God's people flows toward reconciliation. It doesn't flow towards human creeds or constitutions, but in love. Love of the one who gave us ... this. The great, big, beautiful, wonderful, holy, mysterious, reconciling heart of God waits to be discovered and experienced. It's a "circle of life" thing too -- It all came from God in the beginning, and now it all comes back to God in the end. Big Bang to Big Death? Or Big Bang to Big Celebration? If we believe that the story of the Bible is true ... and we do because we're a people of the book ... it's the latter. In the end, as Paul envisioned it in the passage that Tom read this morning, death is swallowed up in a great big victory, as if death were just a tiny drop in God's big ocean of aliveness. As Frederick Buechner once said, "All the death that ever was, so next to life, would scarcely fill a cup."

Human speculation, whether religious or scientific, does the best it can with what it has. Our eyes can only see so far. Our ears can only hear so much. But the Spirit blows like the wind in our midst. The mystery of it all humbles us even as it dignifies us. This mystery lets us know

how small we are even as it inspires us to live big in our faith. This mystery dares us to believe that the love of God is big enough to swallow all fear of death so we can live abundantly. God's Spirit whispers, "Do not fear. All is well." That's why we walk this road from the known into the unknown, deeper into mystery, deeper into light, deeper into love, deeper into joy.