

GOD AT THE END<sup>1</sup>  
Revelation 21: 1-6  
A Communion Meditation by Thomas R. McKibbens  
April 4, 2010

*Now let the heav'ns be joyful!  
Let earth its song begin!  
The world resound in triumph  
And all that is therein....<sup>2</sup>*

An Arab Christian monk named John of Damascus wrote those words over 1200 years ago, yet we still sing them in the hymn entitled "The Day of Resurrection." Even if you find yourself going through extremely difficult times personally, there is a note of triumph on Easter Day. There is celebration in the air. That celebration is not superficial; it has to do with one of the fundamental questions of life: namely, can we trust God all the way through to the very end of life and beyond? So today we take seriously the text we just read: *I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.*

I

I am the A and the Z, the start and the finish, the launch and the recovery, the introduction and the conclusion, the prelude and the finale, the origin and completion, the beginning and the end. And when the writer

---

<sup>1</sup> ©Thomas R. McKibbens, April 4, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> John of Damascus, 8<sup>th</sup> century.

of the Book of Revelation uses such language as *the beginning and the end*, he is not just talking about what we call linear time. He means, %God is the source and origin of all things, and God is also the conclusion of all things.+ The Greek word translated %and+is the word *telos*, which means the goal, the consummation, the completion of everything that has been created. It is what the great scientist Teilhard de Chardin meant when he spoke of God as %the omega point.+<sup>3</sup>

## II

The majestic cadences of Revelation 21 may appear to some to be nothing more than wish fulfillment, but generations of sensitive and intelligent people have read these words and experienced what the poet Wordsworth called %a presence that disturbs me with the joy of elevated thoughts, a sense sublimeõ .+<sup>4</sup> Anyone who has experienced the tears and the heartache and the pain of life can see in these words a vision of God eliminating two of the very things that disturb us the most.

The writer of this vision begins with the elimination of the sea. Oh, yes, I know that the sea is a pleasure for many of us. It is a destination, a vacation, a thing of beauty. For some it is a source of income. But for the

---

<sup>3</sup> See Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957). Also, see Teilhard's *Letters From a Traveller, 1923-1955* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962).

<sup>4</sup> William Wordsworth, "I Have Felt a Presence," from *Tintern Abbey*.

writer of this text, the sea was not a place of pleasure or recreation; nor was it a source of income; it was a symbol of terrifying chaos. He was using the sea as a symbol of things out of control. *There will be no more sea*, he writes.

This use of the sea as a metaphor for things out of control reaches deep into our consciousness. Our culture shares with this writer a story of God creating the world out of the chaos of the sea. The first words of Genesis 1 speak of the world as *a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep*.<sup>5</sup> Their idea of creation is that God looked out at a dark and roiling, watery chaos, a world totally out of control, and God tamed the chaos! Does your world ever resemble chaos? Do you ever feel like you have been set adrift in a world totally out of control?

And when a Hebrew psalmist wanted to express just how far God would pursue a person, the extent to which God would go to find a person, he would write,

*Where can I go from your spirit?  
Or where can I flee from your presence?  
If I take the wings of the morning  
And settle at the farthest limits of the sea...*

[In the symbolism of the writer you cannot get any more chaotic or terrifying than that!]

---

<sup>5</sup> Genesis 1: 1-2.

*Even there your hand shall lead me,  
And your right hand shall hold me fast.<sup>6</sup>*

Add to that the fact that the writer of the Book of Revelation had been exiled to the Isle of Patmos, and the sea is what separated him from all the people he loved. He had a special reason to resent the sea, for the sea was the wall of his island prison. When he envisioned a world in which *the sea shall be no more*, he was dreaming of being in fellowship once again with those he loved! This vision of no more sea is really a vision of reunion with those we love!

The other part of his vision has to do with tears. *God will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more.* Talk about a health care overhaul! This is a vision that would make our current health care legislation pale in comparison! This is not about the health of a nation or a race or a religion or a culture; this is a whole new world with no more tears and no more pain, and death will be no more! This is the ultimate health care overhaul!

There are two contemporary images I think of when I read a passage like this one. The first is from the movie *Titanic*, when just before the great ship sinks there is chaos on deck, and a priest is reciting this very text. The

---

<sup>6</sup> Psalm 139: 7-10.

movie-going audience feels the poignancy of the words when he says, *...the sea shall be no more*. The reality was that 1,522 passengers and crew lost their lives in the icy sea on April 14, 1912, almost 98 years ago to the day. The vision of Revelation is saying, *No more sea! No more senseless suffering and death!*

The other image, even more recent, is the devastation in Port au Prince after the earthquake in Haiti, when there was nothing but chaos and tears and heartache in the city. Hundreds of Haitians gathered near their ruined cathedral and could be heard singing hymns of praise all through the night! News reporters were incredulous!

Where does such faith come from? Is it just wish fulfillment? I think it is something more. I think it is the deep reality of the living, resurrected Christ there with them in the midst of suffering, a reality that is as true today as it was when John wrote the words of the Book of Revelation.

### III

Most of us, I believe, want our religious faith to be meaningful, not magical. We want to look deep into the story of Easter and ask, *What is this story all about?* The answer to that question is found in the phrase, *I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.*

When the story says that Jesus appeared to Mary outside the garden tomb, and she thought he was the gardener, it was in his calling of her name that she recognized him. *Mary*, he said. That is all it took to wipe away every tear from her eyes and eliminate the chaos of her life. To hear your first name, not your title or your position or your proper birth certificate legal name, but your intimate first name- what a thought! That the divine knows you by your first name!

At the calling of her name, she discovered the Easter reality that you and I can know right now: that we can trust God all the way through, from beginning to end! *I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end*. Once we are assured that God is with us for the duration, we are free to celebrate, for we have courage to re-enter the chaos of our world with renewed confidence and a deep peace.