

Ephesians 1:15-23

Revelation 1:1-8

November 21, 2021

Christ the King Sunday

The Sacrament of Baptism

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

THE ALPHA AND THE OMEGA

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.

“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “from beginning to end, from stem to stern, from top to bottom, heart and soul, backwards and forwards, from head to tail, from front to back.”

“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “whole hog, from soup to nuts, 100%, from cover to cover, from start to finish, across the board, the whole ball of wax, the whole shootin’ match, coast to coast, hook line and sinker, aardvark to zymurgy, the whole enchilada, be-all-and-end-all, the whole kit and caboodle.”

“I am from A to Z,” says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.

When I was a kid, I used to imagine the biggest number I could think of. And then I would add one more to that number. It occurred to me and amazed me that you can, ever, ever think of the biggest number in the world. God is bigger than the largest number we can never name.

In the late second or early third century A.D., someone (or someones) put together a collection of sayings and stories about Jesus that came to be known as The Infancy Gospel of Thomas. Scholars think these stories and sayings from Jesus’ childhood reflect the wonderings of early Christians about what Jesus was like as a boy and what it must have been like for Mary and Joseph to raise him. One story tells about Joseph taking the boy Jesus to the schoolhouse to be instructed by a teacher named Zacchaeus. Here’s what happened: “So, Joseph took him by the hand and led him into the classroom. And the teacher wrote the alphabet for him and began to practice it many times, but the child said nothing and did not answer him for a long time. Becoming outraged, the teacher hit him on the head. After enduring this stoically, the child said to him, ‘I am teaching you more than being taught by you because I know the letters you are teaching me and your judgment is great. These things are like a copper pitcher to you or a clashing cymbal which do not offer glory or wisdom through sound. Nobody understands the power of my wisdom.’ Then, when his rage was finished, he said the alphabet from alpha to omega very quickly. Looking the teacher in the face, he told him, ‘Since you do not know the nature of the alpha, how are you going to teach me the beta? Hypocrite, if you know, first teach me the alpha then I will believe what you say about the beta.’ Then, he began to tell the teacher about the first letter. And the teacher was not strong enough to say anything.

Then, while many were listening, he said to Zacchaeus, ‘Listen, teacher, and observe the structure of the first letter, how it has two standard lines and impresses coming to a point in the middle and remaining there, coming together, lifting up, dancing, having three corners, having two corners, without strokes, of one family, well-balanced, as long as the alpha has equal lines.’ When Zacchaeus heard such great words and allegories of this sort about the first letter from the child, he was at a loss over what his defense and teaching could be. And he said to those present, ‘Oh my, I am suffering and at a loss and am ashamed of myself because I took this child. So, take him, I urge you, brother Joseph. I am not able to bear his stare or his direct speech.’” Imagine such knowledge!

That’s a strange story, isn’t it? Can’t you imagine how the early Christians were wondering what it meant for this boy Jesus to be the Son of God? But is it all that different from us thinking and wondering about how a baby born in Bethlehem and laid in manger could be the King of kings and Lord of lords, Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth?

Today is a good day to think about such things. On the church calendar, this Sunday is marked as Christ the King Sunday. It is the last Sunday in the church year. Next Sunday is the first Sunday of Advent. On Christ the King Sunday, we praise God for the life, death, and resurrection of his Son, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Today is the culmination of a year’s worth of stories about who Jesus is and what Jesus did and does as God’s Son. Christ the King Sunday is a wonderful ending and the threshold of a new beginning. Christ the King Sunday looks back at the life of Jesus and proclaims him King of kings. Christ the King Sunday looks ahead to Advent, that four-week period that is more than just getting ready for Christmas. Advent also helps us look back and remember the first coming of Jesus and look ahead to Christ’s second coming. In the meantime, we praise God in Jesus Christ – the Alpha and Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.

On Christ the King Sunday, we often hear Jesus described in cosmic language, such as Paul’s prayer for the Ephesian believers in today’s epistle lesson: “I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power. God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.” (Ephesians 1:17-23)

Our handbell choir has started practicing Christmas music. One of the pieces is a beautiful arrangement of the 5th century A.D. hymn “Of the Father’s Love Begotten,” which is based on a poem by the Christian poet Marcus Aurelius Clemens Prudentias.

The song sings of the relationship among God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, in language that sounds like Ephesians and Revelation:

*Of the Father's love begotten,
ere the worlds began to be,
he is Alpha and Omega;
he the source, the ending he,
of the things that are, that have been,
and that future years shall see,
evermore and evermore!*

*O ye heights of heaven, adore him.
Angel hosts, his praises sing.
Powers, dominions, bow before him,
and extol our God and King.
Let no tongue on earth be silent;
every voice in concert ring,
evermore and evermore!*

*Christ, to thee with God the Father,
and, O Holy Ghost, to thee,
hymn and chant and high thanksgiving
and unwearied praises be.
Honor, glory, and dominion,
and eternal victory,
evermore and evermore! Amen.*

The language is lofty and glorious and worthy to praise Jesus Christ on Christ the King Sunday and every day. But we might wonder what the cosmic Christ, King of kings and Lord of lords, has to do with our everyday lives. When I stand at the graveside of your loved one, I begin the service with words such as these: “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last. I was dead and behold I am alive forever and ever; and I have the keys of Death and Hades. Because I live, you also will live. . . Do not be afraid, I am the first and the last, and the living one; I was dead, and behold, I am alive forever and ever.” (Rev. 21:6; 22:13; 1:17–18; John 14:19; Rev. 1:17-18) We have our hope for the life to come in the Alpha and the Omega.

Jesus Christ, King of kings and Lord of lords, also makes a difference in and for our lives from the very beginning. As we baptize Harris today, we are reminded of God’s unconditional and unending love for us in Jesus Christ, even when we are too young to comprehend such love (as if we can fully comprehend God’s love even as adults!). A beautiful hymn in our *Glory to God* hymnal tells of God’s unending love for us in Jesus Christ throughout our lives, from A to Z, beginning to end:

*I was there to hear your borning cry, I'll be there when you are old.
I rejoiced the day you were baptized, to see your life unfold.
I was there when you were but a child, with a faith to suit you well;
In a blaze of light you wandered off to find where demons dwell.
When you heard the wonder of the Word, I was there to cheer you on;
You were raised to praise the living Lord, to whom you now belong.
If you find someone to share your time and you join your hearts as one,
I'll be there to make your verses rhyme from dusk 'till rising sun.
In the middle ages of your life, not too old, no longer young,
I'll be there to guide you through the night, complete what I've begun.
When the evening gently closes in, and you shut your weary eyes,
I'll be there as I have always been with just one more surprise.
I was there to hear your borning cry, I'll be there when you are old.
I rejoiced the day you were baptized, to see your life unfold.*

We have our hope for the life today, in the Alpha and the Omega.

If you have looked ahead in today's order of service, you have seen that our final hymn is #266, "Joy to the World!" You might be wondering why we're singing a Christmas carol when it's not even Advent yet. Did you know that Isaac Watts didn't write the song as a Christmas carol? He based it on a paraphrase of Psalm 98, which says in verses 4-9. It's a song that talks about the joy in the world when the Lord of lords and King of kings comes again.

*Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth;
break forth into joyous song and sing praises.
Sing praises to the LORD with the lyre,
with the lyre and the sound of melody.
With trumpets and the sound of the horn
make a joyful noise before the King, the LORD.
Let the sea roar, and all that fills it;
the world and those who live in it.
Let the floods clap their hands;
let the hills sing together for joy
at the presence of the LORD,
for he is coming to judge the earth.
He will judge the world with righteousness,
and the peoples with equity.*

On this special day in the life of our church, when we celebrate the Sacrament of Baptism with Harris and his family, sing praises to Jesus Christ, King of kings and Lord of lords, and look ahead to the beginning of Advent next Sunday, we can remember that Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. He is Alpha and Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end. In him we have our hope, not just for

the future, but for every single day of our lives. And that is certainly good news of great joy to all the world!

Let us pray: You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being. We will praise you, and exalt your name, for we know that you are Alpha, the beginning of all things, and Omega, the end, and all that is between. We shall praise you ever more. Amen.