

The City of God

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, on the sixth Sunday of Easter, May 21, 1995. Scripture Lessons: Acts 16:9-15; Psalm 67; Revelation 21:10, 22-22:5; John 14:23-39.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

I know a man whose family, when he was a child, was given to hospitality. Children in the family never knew whom they would find at the breakfast table. Every weekend there was a guest. For revenge, the kids would put, on the beside table, an exciting mystery story by Agatha Christie or Dorothy Sayers. But first they'd tear out the last several pages where the mystery was resolved. Imagine red-eyed guests trudging to breakfast utterly frustrated: "How did it end?" Every once in a while some guest would come across a copy of the book in book store and would write explaining that the ending changed the whole story. What had seemed significant turned out to mean nothing at all. What appeared to be an

Inconsequential detail turned out to be very important in the final outcome.

Our lives - as well as the entire history of the world is a mystery with the last chapters missing. What's the meaning of our lives? What's the meaning of history? the rise and fall of empires? What's it all about? Does history have any meaning? Do you ever give any thought to questions like this? There are two versions of how the story ends - two versions - one leaves out God all together. Here's several examples of how some people have seen the end of history.

You're probably all familiar with a poem by Robert Frost.

Some say the world will end in fire,
Some say in ice.
From what I've tasted of desire
I hold with those who favor fire.
But if it had to perish twice,
I think I know enough of hate
To say that for destruction ice
Is also great

And would suffice.

Does ~~history have any meaning?~~ ^{history} Is history going anywhere? Is ~~it~~ destined only to end in fire or ice?

Or listen to another poem by Archibald MacLeish entitled, "The End of the World." This poem is a little bizarre. You don't need to understand every detail in the poem to get the drift of what MacLeish is saying.

Quite unexpectedly, as Vasserot
The armless ambidextrian was lighting
A match between his great and second toe,
And Ralph the lion was engaged in biting
The neck of Madam Sossman while the drum
Pointed, and Teeny was about to cough
In waltz-time swinging Locke by the thumb -
Quite unexpectedly the top blew off.

And there, there overhead, there, there hung over
Those thousands of white faces, those dazed eyes,
There in the starless dark the poise, the hover,
There with vast wings across the cancelled skies,
There in the sudden blackness the black pall
Of nothing, nothing, nothing - nothing at all.

Is that how the world ends? ~~Is that the end of history?~~ Is history "a tale told by an idiot, signifying nothing?" If it is, what possible meaning and significance can our own lives have?

Now imagine that, as a child, you were brought up with no other stories of how the world ends than these. Imagine that, ~~as a child~~, you were brought up as a thoroughgoing secularist - all the stories you heard left out the God who comes to us in Jesus Christ. All the stories tell you that history has no meaning. History has no purpose. All human achievement, all the literature and music and art created by gifted men and women destined for darkness - for nothingness. Our

human politics and intellectual achievements come to nothing - nothing - they all end in fire or ice. ~~If this version of how the story ends is believed and acted upon there would be no culture, no literature, no art, no civilization - only despair.~~ And yet increasing numbers of people I talk with and read about say they believe this version of the end of the story. And it affects them.

But there's another version of how the human story ends. ^{The Bible... The Book of Revelation... Not in detail...} The end of history ^{Even: body kneels, loves, worships God and His Christ; no darkness; nations at peace; cultural treasures of all the cultures of the world brought to the city... Nothing unclean; no one who practices abomination; no lies in a river & trees like Eden. God's servant will reign for ever & ever} is the city of God. We sing, "We're marching to Zion, beautiful, beautiful Zion." ^{To best understand them we need to listen to some of our hymns,}

We're marching upward to Zion, the beautiful city of God."

Turn in your hymnals to hymn 446. Listen to the words.

① Glorious things of thee are spoken,
Zion, city of our God;
God, whose word cannot be broken,
Formed thee for a blest abode.
On the rock of ages founded,
What can shake thy sure repose?
With salvation's walls surrounded,
Thou may'st smile at all thy foes.

② See the streams of living waters,
Spring from eternal love,
Well supply thy sons and daughters
And all fear of want remove.
Who can faint while such a river
Ever flows their thirst to assuage?
Grace, which like the Lord the giver,
Never fails from age to age.

Now turn to hymn 437 written by Margaret Clarkson. The concluding stanza is a prayer. The vision of the City of God is contrasted with our present cities... a great cry to God for our cities to become like the city of God

O healing Savior, Prince of Peace,
Salvation's source and sum,
For You our broken cities cry:
O come, Lord Jesus, come!
With truth Your royal diadem,
With righteousness Your rod,
O come, Lord Jesus, bring to earth
The city of our God!

Now turn to hymn 453 by Walter Russell Bowie. An Episcopalian priest... etc...
Again as he sees the City of God... He is motivated to pray & seek the welfare of our
present cities

O holy city, seen of John,
Where Christ, the Lamb, does reign,
Within whose foursquare walls shall come
No night, nor need, nor pain,
And where the tears are wiped from eyes
That shall not weep again!

O shame to us who rest content
While lust and greed for gain
In street and shop and tenement
Wring gold from human pain,
And bitter lips in blind despair cry,
"Christ has died in vain!"

Give us, O God, the strength to build
The city that has stood
Too long a dream, whose laws are love,
Whose ways are servanthood,
And where the sun that shines becomes
God's grace for human good.

Already in the mind of God
That city rises fair.
Lo, how its splendor challenges
The souls that greatly dare,
And bids us seize the whole of life
And build its glory there.

Or close your eyes and hear the words of a song that many of remember

Harry Ireson singing.

Last night I lay asleeping,
There came a dream so fair;
I stood in old Jerusalem
Beside the temple there.
I heard the children singing,
And ever as they sang,
Methought the voice of angels
From heav'n in answer rang;
Me thought the voice of angels
From heav'n in answer rang,
Jerusalem! Jerusalem! Lift up your gates and sing,
Hosanna in the highest!
Hosanna to your King!

And then the final stanza,

I saw the Holy City beside the tideless sea.

The light of God was on its streets, the gates were open wide.
And all who would might enter and no one was denied.
No need of moon or stars by night or sun to shine by day.
It was the new Jerusalem that would not pass away.
It was the new Jerusalem that would not pass away.
Jerusalem, Jerusalem! Sing for the night is o'er!
Hosanna in the highest, Hosanna forevermore!
Hosanna in the highest, Hosanna forevermore!

Christians believe this version of the story of how the world ends.

When I was in college I was involved in the Christian Service Council. It was back in the sixties. Each Saturday I'd travel down to the south side of the city of Chicago to convert men and women and young people living in the ghetto. Well, I ended up not converting anybody. But there was a sense in which I was converted. Everywhere I found faithful Christians struggling against all kinds of obstacles to live for Christ and make a difference.

I remember attending one worship service in an inner city church. The service lasted about four hours. The congregation sang. Then the choir sang. Then the preacher would pray and the choir and congregation would sing some more. Then the preacher started preaching - 20, 30... 45 minutes. He paused to take out a handkerchief and wipe the sweat off his face. Someone shouted, "Help him Lord." He sat down and then another preacher got up and continued where the first one left off like some kind of tag team. The preaching and the singing lasted about four hours.

After the service we students from Wheaton were invited into the pastor's study. The preacher explained to us why he preached so long - why the worship

service lasted so long. He said, "My congregation leaves ^{This sanctuary} here and they go into a world that tells them, "You're nothing!" "You have no future!" "You'll never amount to anything!" "You're second class!" "You're trash!" "You're going nowhere!"

"They hear that story over and over again all week and it's lies. It's all lies. So it takes me at least four hours to tell them a different story. You are somebody. You are created in God's image. The Lamb of God has redeemed you. You are valuable. Christ died for you. By the grace of God you can make something of your lives. You can make a difference in your homes, in your families, in your communities and in this city. You are somebody. You're going to end up reigning forever and ever."

The stories we listen to affect us. They change us. They can tear us down.

They can build us up. They can rob our lives of meaning. They can give purpose to ^{there are two versions left the story of how history ends ... one leaves out God entirely -} our lives. I'm betting my life on the trust of the story the Bible tells - the story that begins in the Garden of Eden and ends in the City of God.