

“Thy Kingdom Come”
John 13:31-35 | Revelation 21:1-6a
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Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

“See, the home of God is among mortals.
He will dwell with them;
they will be his peoples,
and God himself will be with them and be their God;
he will wipe every tear from their eyes.
Death will be no more;
mourning and crying and pain will be no more,
for the first things have passed away.”

And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.” Also he said, “Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.” Then he said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End.

The Word of the Lord.
Thanks be to God.

Let’s get this straight up front. Math is not my thing. I wish it were--*I really do*--but I struggled with it in school, pushing my calculator aside to pick up a book or a map or, well, *anything* else instead. I don’t want to make too many assumptions, but I bet the same is true of many pastors.

Let me give you an example of what I mean. It was around this time last year. We were approaching Easter, which meant that here at Westminster, we were also approaching the great excitement of Easter Donuts. In anticipation of the big event(s), your pastoral staff did the difficult math of determining just how many donuts would be needed to feed the hungry throngs. Gathered around the conference table, where such critical decisions are made, we laid it all out like a word problem.

If we bought 30 boxes in 2019, that would be 360 donuts. Factor in 2020, which was a wash, of course, and 2021, not so very different. But recent worship attendance was trending upward, and based on last week’s numbers, we figured we could expect at least 600 people in worship on Easter Sunday. Don’t forget that parents sometimes indulge their children’s sugar cravings on Sunday mornings, so some might go back for seconds. And the weather was supposed to be good, so throw in a few extra for good measure.

Collecting all these variables, we did some very sophisticated math and concluded that we would need--are you ready?--roughly 800 boxes of donuts. Did that seem about right to us? Well, yeah, why not? None of us batted an eye. Fortunately, somebody swooped in with some

better math before we could order nearly 10,000 donuts. But by then, my point was proven. Pastors and math don't always mix.

That's how I landed myself in Professor Tim Chartier's class my sophomore year of college. As any good liberal arts student, I was required to take a math class, so I scoured the course catalogue for the one that seemed the least intimidating. Sports Statistics it was! Fortunately, what could have been a slog turned out to be a great class, both engaging and practical, especially when this time of year rolls around.

You see, Professor Chartier's research just so happens to focus on this month's favorite small talk question: how's your bracket? For Chartier and his students, the answer is *good*. Very good. So good, in fact, that students in his Sports Statistics class—the same class I once took—regularly out-predict upwards of 97% of brackets submitted to ESPN.

Recently, Professor Chartier reflected on his area of expertise—bracketology—in an article entitled “The Impossible Allure of the Perfect Bracket.”¹ In it, he speaks to the perpetual excitement of picking teams, saying, “The charm of the event, ultimately, remains rooted in how ineffectual rigorous analysis and robust algorithms can actually be in predicting how the tournaments will play out. They will always, to some extent, be an exercise in randomness, with perfection an impossibly distant dream.”

He goes on, “Bracketology really underscores the unpredictable nature of the human experience. I think it's why we watch sports. No matter how much we know, no matter how much we study, no matter how much we cheer, we intrinsically know that we have no idea how it's going to unfold.”

Now, doesn't that sound a bit like life? No matter how much we know...or study...or cheer...or cling...or control, we simply cannot predict the future. Still, we can't help but wonder about what will happen down the road. So, we ask big questions, like: Is there an end to history? What is eternity? What lies ahead after death?

It's natural to wonder about the future. In fact, you've probably already done so several times today. I bet you've asked yourself something along the lines of: Are we going to make it out the door with both shoes on every child's feet? Where are we going to lunch after worship? Is it going to be nice enough this afternoon for me to ride my bike? Do I have any homework due tomorrow?

Sometimes, we wonder about the future with anxiety. What will the test results reveal? Will they ever forgive me? Will I learn to forgive myself? What will be the effects of climate change on the next generation?

At least as often, we look to the future with excitement. When will the days get longer? What will this new season of life bring? Who will this child become?

Whether on an existential or immediate scale, the future is never far from our minds. We're enamored, it seems, by what we can't know, so we try and we try to predict and perfect, always reaching for some distant dream, though the odds of ever wrapping our minds around it are slim. For you bracketologists, they hover around a mere one in 9.2 quintillion, to be exact.

So, what do we, as Presbyterians, believe about the future? That's a question in keeping with our present sermon series called “Back to Basics.” All throughout Lent, we're exploring some of the basic doctrines and beliefs of the Christian faith, with a particular lens for how Presbyterians view these matters. So far, we've reflected on issues of salvation—on what it

¹ Keh, Andrew. “The Impossible Allure of the Perfect Bracket.” The New York Times. The New York Times, March 12, 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/12/sports/ncaabasketball/perfect-bracket-ncaa-tournament.html>.

means to be saved and on who gets saved—as well as on sin and its not-so-distant cousin, grace. Today, we consider how our Reformed heritage might shape our view of the future.

In theological circles, questions about the future fall under an area called *eschatology*. Did you catch that? *Eschatology*. Bless you! No, what sounds like a sneeze actually comes from the Greek root, *eschatos*, meaning “last.” So, eschatology is the study of the “last things” or “end things.” It refers to God’s ultimate plan and purposes for the end of history and beyond, as well as what those plans mean for our lives here and now.

You’ve likely heard a bit about what some other traditions would say on the subject on eschatology. I know I’m not Ben, but I’m going to ask for a quick show of hands. How many of you have heard of the “Left Behind” series? Do you know what I’m talking about? *Left Behind* is a multimedia franchise that started with a 16-book series that’s been adapted into five feature films starring the likes of Nicolas Cage, among others. It paints a bleak picture of the future, of the end times, when some people are taken immediately to heaven and others—as the name would suggest—are left behind on earth, where God’s judgment rains down upon the world in the form of violence and disaster.

If you’re thinking, “that doesn’t sound like what Presbyterians believe!” you’re absolutely right. Presbyterians do not believe the bible gives us absolute answers about how the future will take shape. We don’t believe in some guaranteed order of events with clear signs pointing to the end of time as we know it, nor do we believe that God plans to exact revenge upon the earth. However, we do look to scripture to affirm certain elements of what lies ahead.

The “Left Behind” version of what happens in the end is based—at least in part—on the biblical book of Revelation, the same general section of scripture from which I read earlier. It’s true that Revelation describes in graphic detail the ultimate conquest of good over evil. It’s also true that Revelation was written by people seeking hope in the midst of persecution. The vivid imagery and language the author employs isn’t meant as a literal prediction, but as a poetic description of God’s ultimate triumph over evil. Listen again to verses from today’s reading:

“God will wipe every tear from their eyes.
Death will be no more;
mourning and crying and pain will be no more,
for the first things have passed away.”

While Presbyterians do not believe it’s possible to predict exactly what the future holds, we do believe that God is establishing a reality free from suffering, where death will be no more. We believe that God is working in and through the world to bring about God’s kingdom, a reality marked by justice, mercy, and peace. We believe that sometime in the future, we will fully experience that reality. We will be whole. We will be comforted. We will be with God.

All of this leaves us with another question: what are we supposed to do in the meantime? While we await the coming of God’s kingdom, that new reality where “mourning and crying and pain will be no more,” what should we make of the far from perfect world around us? How should we engage with war, violence, poverty, and the very many “-isms” we encounter in the here and now?

Scripture gives us guidance in that direction, too. Those to whom John’s revelation was directed could not wait for God’s kingdom to arrive in some distant time and place. They were under persecution. Faced with the constant need to choose between their faith and their economic and social advantage, perhaps even their lives, they needed a higher hope right where they were.

The Book of Revelation makes room for God’s kingdom to come on earth, as it is in heaven. “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth,” it goes. Not “I saw earth left behind and replaced with heaven,” but a new heaven and a new earth together, so intertwined that we can hardly tell where one stops and the other begins. Experiencing the connection between the earthly and the ethereal isn’t beyond us. It only requires our expectant attention. The poet, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, put it this way:

“Earth's crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God,
But only [the one] who sees takes off [their] shoes.”²

Can you connect to what these verses are saying? Have you ever paid attention long enough to experience a bit of heaven on earth? Perhaps in the form of a place that’s sacred to you? Or a relationship knit together by grace? Or a bit of hope that breaks through against all odds? And have those moments inspired reverence? Sparked wonder? Made you more aware of God’s presence right here and right now?

As Presbyterians, we don’t believe God’s kingdom is beyond our reach, something we’ll only attain in the far-off future. We also believe God’s kingdom is here among us, an extension of the ministry Jesus began over 2,000 years ago. Jesus came to destroy death-dealing powers, to “proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”³ Suffering, dying, and rising from the grave, Jesus triumphed over death. His resurrection was a turning point in history, which gives us a hope-filled glimpse of God’s coming kingdom.

We don’t just expect God’s kingdom to come in some distant time and place. We anticipate it right where we are. As one of the original Reformed theologians, John Calvin, put it, “We begin in the present life, through various benefits, to taste the sweetness of the divine generosity in order to whet our hope and desire to seek after the full revelation of this.”⁴ In other words, God’s kingdom is both present and still to come, both *now* and *not yet*. As Presbyterians, we lean into this paradox. We believe we have access to a real taste of heaven right where we are, even as we await the full revelation of God’s heavenly reign, where “mourning and crying and pain will be no more.”

Does that mean things on earth will gradually keep getting better until we finally attain heaven? You may have heard the quote from Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. that goes: “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”⁵ It’s easy to hear a quote like that and imagine a straight, linear arc of steady progress. It’s easy to take King’s quote to mean that (to quote a pithier phrase) “every day, in every way, things are getting better.” But I don’t think that’s what King believed, nor for that matter, is it what we, as Presbyterians, do.

We live as Christians, seeking God’s will, striving to serve God in all we do, because ultimately we believe God’s purposes will be carried out. Yet our hope isn’t based on human aspirations or accomplishments. We are called to pursue God’s wholeness and justice. But

² Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2020).

³ Luke 4:18-19

⁴ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion, Volume I*, ed. John T. Mitchell (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), 715.

⁵ Martin Luther King Jr., “Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution.” Speech given at the National Cathedral, March 31, 1968.

ultimately our hope isn't based in whether our bodies break down (or get better), whether our relationships are reconciled (or not), or whether we end homeless, hunger, and war. Much as we desire and strive for those things, their realization isn't at the heart of our hope.

Instead, our hope is based in our belief that God is at work in the world, against all odds and appearances, and that God will ultimately come again to make all things new. Even when we're taking one step forward and two steps back, we still hold to the truth of God's *now* and *not yet* kingdom. That's not an easy thing to do, of course. It's one of the reasons why faith is best shared. Like those who pass around a candle in the darkness, we need one another to take turns holding hope through all life's ups and downs.

In just a moment, we'll give voice to what we believe using the words of The Confession of 1967. Presbyterians wrote this confession to reflect their faith during a time in particular need of God's reconciling power, and we carry their faith forward in our present day. Part of the confession describes God's kingdom "as a ferment in the world, stirring hope in all people." I love this image—God's reign as a ferment. Any baker or brewer can certainly relate. As the parable goes, God's kingdom is like yeast that causes goodness and mercy to bubble up all around us. It gives our lives a new flavor, even as it offers us a taste of the divine wonder that's yet to come.

That taste of God's kingdom helps us to be hopeful in a world where hope doesn't always come easy. It assures us that the pain and suffering we experience in the now are not the final word. It strengthens and sustains us to participate in God's mission among us to "love one another" just as Christ has loved us. And it helps us to work and pray for God's kingdom to come and God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven.