

First Baptist Vancouver
First Sunday of Advent
November 29, 2009

Text: **Revelation 22:6-21**

Title: "The Bright Morning Star"

I like the way Fredrick Buechner

illustrates the time frame in which we are now living.

Imagine we are in a theatre.

"The house lights go off and the footlights come on.

Even the chattiest stop chattering

as they wait in darkness for the curtain to rise.

In the orchestra pit, the violin bows are poised.

The conductor has raised his baton.

You are aware of the beating of your heart.

The extraordinary thing that is about to happen

is matched only by the extraordinary moment just before it happens.

Advent is the name of that moment."

[*Whistling in the Dark*, 2]

During the years I was in elementary school

we lived in Los Alamos, New Mexico.

But we would travel nearly every Christmas to North Minnesota,

to the little town of Chisholm,

to spend the holidays with my grandmother,

whom I adored.

She is, after all, the one who first told me about Jesus.

My dad would pack the whole family in station wagon,

and drive the distance non-stop in about 32 hours!

All the way along, I would watch for the signs telling us how far we yet had to go.

When we crossed the boarder from South Dakota into Minnesota

my heart would begin to pound!

200 miles.

150 miles.

140 miles.

125 miles.

100 miles.

The pounding would intensify!

Not too long now!

90 miles.

75 miles.

60 miles.

50 miles.

35 miles.

25 miles.

Chisholm – 15 miles!

10 miles.

5 miles.

1 mile! Not long now!

We would cross the bridge into town, driving down Main Street.

Dad would turn right onto 4th Avenue North.

We would cross 1st Street North West.

Then 2nd Street North West.

Then 3rd Street North West

where the little market stood.

Then 4th Street!

Dad would turn left.

And drive up the hill two blocks to 422.

Before he could shut off the engine,

I was out of the car.

With great joy and anticipation I would run across
 the shoveled side walk,
 bound up the stairs unto the porch,
 and knocked on the door as loud as I could.

I would hear, “I am coming.”

I kept knocking.

“I am coming.”

I could hear her slowly shuffling across the living room.

Finally she would grab hold of the door knob,
 and begin to turn it.

The extraordinary thing that was **about to happen**
 was matched only by the extraordinary moment before it happened.
 That moment is Advent.

In the Biblical text before us this first Sunday of Advent,

Jesus speaks into that moment.

The text is *the Revelation of Jesus Christ*, chapter 22, verses 6-21.

In the text we will hear Jesus says three times,

“I am coming,” “I am coming,” “I am coming.”

And in the text we will hear Jesus speak His last great Self-designations:

we will hear Him speak the last of His audacious “I AM” sayings.

Hear now the Word of God.

Every time we read the last book of the Bible

we need to remember its title.

Keep the title before us and we will not go astray as we read the book.

Keep the title before us and we will end up where the apostle John

is wanting to lead us.

The title is not “Revelations” – although in the book

we are given a series of revelations.

The title is not even “Revelation” – although in the book

we are given one sustained revelation.

The title is “The Revelation of Jesus Christ.”

The point being that the book is all about a PERSON.

“The Revelation of Jesus Christ.”

OF Jesus Christ.

In what sense? OF in what sense?

OF Jesus Christ as in BY Jesus Christ?

Or OF Jesus Christ as in ABOUT Jesus Christ?

Yes.

Both. As is often the case in the writings of the apostle John.

The Revelation BY Jesus Christ... ABOUT Jesus Christ.

The title of the last book of the Bible is:

“The Revelation OF Jesus Christ, BY Jesus Christ, ABOUT Jesus Christ.”

Literally, the title is “The Apocalypse of Jesus Christ.”

The opening words of the book are “*apocalysis Iysous Christou.*”

The apocalyse of Jesus Christ.

Now, when you hear the word “apocalyse” what do you think or feel?

Most people in our time think or feel,

“oh, no, something terrible is about to happen.”

Right?

So we have movie like *Apocalypse Now* or *Apocalypto* or now *Apocalypse 2012*.

Or we speak of extreme weather patterns –

like super-typhoon and tsunamis or polar-ice-cap melting –

as having “apocalyptic” proportions.

When, however, people of the First century heard the word “apocalyse”

they did not think or feel in those ways.

When they heard the word they responded,

“oh, good ... something wonderful is about to happen!”

For the word “apocalypse” simply means:

Unveiling,

Disclosure,

Opening up,

Breaking through from hidden-ness.

The word was used for:

The pulling back of a curtain,

The lifting up of a cover,

The opening of a window or door.

So, the title of the last book of the Bible is

“The Apocalypse OF Jesus Christ,
 BY Jesus Christ,
 ABOUT Jesus Christ.”

The title is

“The Unveiling OF Jesus Christ,
 BY Jesus Christ,
 ABOUT Jesus Christ.”

The title is

“The Breaking Though From Hidden-ness OF Jesus Christ,
 BY Jesus Christ,
 ABOUT Jesus Christ.”

Now, “apocalyptic literature,” the kind of literature in the text before us today,
 has two practical purposes.

Keep these practical purposes in mind and we will not go astray
 as we read the rest of the book.

Keep these practical purposes in mind
 and discipleship and ministry
 take on fresh vigor and joy.

1. The first practical purpose:

to set the present moment – in all its ambiguity and uncertainty –

in light of the **unseen realities** of the **future**. [Repeat]

For if we can see the future – if only for a moment –

we see the present differently.

Indeed, we live the present differently.

“Jesus is coming.”

And He bringing with Him a whole new heaven and earth!

He is bringing with Him a new city!

The city we city-builders have longed to build.

If we can see that city – if only for a moment –

it will change the way we see our city.

So, first practical purpose:

set the present moment in light of the unseen realities of the future.

2. But more importantly, the second practical purpose:

set the present moment – in all its ambiguity and uncertainty –

in light of the **unseen realities** of the **present**. [Repeat{

“Things are not as they seem,” is the fundamental apocalyptic conviction.

Or, more precisely,

“Things are not only as they seem.”

There is more to reality

more to this present moment ...

than we can know with our un-aided

intellect, emotions, imaginations.

And apocalyptic literature seeks to open up that more.

To set the present moment

in light of the unseen realities of the PRESENT!

AND the greatest unseen reality of the present is a PERSON!

The greatest unseen reality of the present is the

Incarnate,

Crucified,

Resurrected,

Ascended,

and Coming Jesus!

Do you believe that?

The apostle John would tell us that unless we do

we do not understand this present moment in history rightly.

The greatest unseen reality of the present speaks into the present.

“Look!” He says.

It is the major exhortation of the last book of the Bible.

“Look!”

“I am coming.”

Three times.

“I am coming.”

Not just, “I will come.”

As wonderful as that would be!

But, “I am coming.”

Even now.

In process.

“Coming.”

And in His coming He tells us again Who He is.

He tells us Who He is so we can understand the present moment rightly.

“I AM the Alpha and Omega,” says Jesus.

The first and last letters of the Greek alphabet.

“I AM the First and the Last,” He continues.

Not just a repetition of “Alpha and Omega.”

“I Am the first and last letters of any alphabet”;

the first and last of any sequence we can imagine.

“I AM the Beginning and the End,” He continues.

Again not just a repetition.

“I Am **before** the first and **after** the last;

I Am the beginning and the end.

The word translated “Beginning” is ARCHE

from which we get the English word “archetype.”

Arche means head or source.

“I AM the head of everything,

the source of all life.”

The word translated “End” is TELOS.

Telos means goal or inherent destiny.

“I AM the goal of everything,

the inherent destiny of all life.”

It means that Jesus Christ is inescapable!

We meet Him in the beginning and in the end.

He is there in the beginning at the source,

He is there in the end as the inherent destiny.

He is the end because He is the beginning.

No matter which way we turn we run into Jesus Christ.

No one can finally run from Him.

No one can finally run from the source of their existence.

No one can finally run from the inherent destiny of their existence.

A great comfort for all of us

who have loved ones in the “far country.”

“I AM the Arche and Telos.”

He is the Inescapable Reality of the present.

But He does not leave it at that.

Jesus goes on to tell us more.

Why?

Why not leave us with that great triple-claim?

Why not leave us with that great Self-designation ringing in our ears?

Because He wants to understand the present moment rightly.

He continues:

“I AM the Root and Offspring of David.”

David is the greatest human figure of the Old Testament.

It is to David that God makes the greatest,

world-impacting promises.

It is to David that God promises a kingdom that will never end.

A kingdom of justice and mercy,

a kingdom of abundance and creativity,

a kingdom where all of life’s relationships

work again.

What a claim!

“I AM the Root of David.”

Jesus is the source of all the great expectations around David;
 the ideals of David's kingdom
 emerge from Jesus,
 long before Jesus was born into the world.

And He says, "I AM the Offspring of David."

Jesus is the one in whom all the expectations are to be fulfilled;
 all the ideals of everlasting kingdom are realized in Jesus.

"I AM the one bringing about the Kingdom of God in the world,"

is another way to put it.

In the midst of all the ambiguity and uncertainty of the present,

I am causing the everlasting kingdom to come.

But He does not leave at that.

He goes on to tell us more.

Why?

Why not leave us with that great Kingly claim?

Why not leave us with that self-designation ringing in our ears?

Because, again, He wants us to understand the present moment rightly.

So He goes on to say,

"I AM the Bright Morning Star."

"I AM the Bright Morning Star."

That is what He wants ringing in our ears.

Why?

Why does Jesus leave us with that Self-designation as His last?

Why “Bright Morning Star”?

In was in 96 AD that John first heard Jesus make this claim.

96 AD was the year things appeared to collapse all around John.

Life has been difficult enough up to that time for believers in the Roman Empire.

But in 96 AD the pressure became more intense and more widespread.

The emperor at that time was a man named Domitian (81-96).

He was a profoundly insecure man

who lived in morbid fear of a coup. [G.B. Caird]

So to compensate for his insecurity

Domitian ordered that all people throughout the Empire

worship him as “Domine et Deus,” as “Lord and God.”

For most citizens this was no problem.

Most were poly-theists, so what was one more god?

John, however – and thousands of other disciples of Jesus –

could not abide by the Emperor’s edict.

Respect Caesar – yes.

Pay taxes to Caesar – okay.

Worship Caesar – no.

John, in his mid-80s, was not about to bow his knee

to a mere mortal who had put himself where he does not belong.

So, graciously, John refused to worship the emperor.

He was, therefore, from the state's perspective "an atheist."

His simple act of discipleship threatened the ideology of the empire.

He had to be punished.

So, the Romans arrested John

and hauled him off to the prison island of Patmos.

Where is the words of Thomas Torrance, John was

"abandoned to the inhospitable solitude
of the restless murmuring sea,
and left to rot and bleach on the rocks."

A crisis of major proportions.

Not just a crisis of survival, of physical suffering.

But posing a crisis of theology, a crisis of faith.

Calling into question the central affirmations of the Gospel.

"The time is fulfilled, the Kingdom of God has come near."

Where now is the evidence?

"Jesus is risen, death and evil are defeated!"

Where now is the evidence?

"Jesus is Lord! The Nazarene is the true Emperor!"

Where now is the evidence?

Is Jesus not able to protect those whom He loves?

If Jesus has won the victory over darkness,

why does the darkness seem to gain the upper hand,

even over Jesus' people?

It is in that context that John first hears Jesus make the claim:

“I Am the Bright Morning Star.”

It was in 1981 that I first heard Jesus make this claim.

Oh, I had read the words many times before.

But it was in 1981 that I finally heard.

It was the year that the walls seemed to cave in around me.

It was a year of increasing darkness and despair.

The irony was that nothing in my life should have led to this state of being.

God had given me a wonderful woman as my wife.

God had given Sharon and me a wonderful little boy as our son.

I was pasturing one of the fastest growing churches in Southern California.

I was being asked by all kinds of groups to come and preach the Gospel.

But there I was, engulfed in a dark cloud,

wondering if I wanted to go on living.

In the summer of that year,

the elders of the church gave me a three-month sabbatical.

So we headed off to the mountains of Colorado.

To my horror, the darkness intensified.

Late one night I was reading through the last book of the Bible.

And I finally saw ...

I finally heard ...

I finally felt what Jesus is saying to us on the last page of the book,

“I Am the Bright Morning Star.”

“I Am the Bright Morning Star.

“I Am the Bright Morning Star.”

In the Roman world, the morning star – Venus –

was the symbol of victory and sovereignty.

Roman generals,

before going to battle,

would appeal to Venus for help.

Temples to Venus were erected all over the Empire.

Caesar’s legions carried her sign on their standards.

By calling Himself “the Bright Morning Star”

Jesus is announcing His victory and His sovereignty.

In the Jewish world, the image of the morning star

would recall the prophecy of a man named Balaam,

recorded in Numbers 24:17.

“A star shall come forth from Jacob,
a scepter shall come forth from Israel.”

The prophecy was taken to refer to the Messiah,

who would come to overthrow injustice and oppression,

to bring in God’s Shalom.

By calling Himself “the Bright Morning Star”

Jesus is declaring that He has come to fulfill the Biblical promise,
to bring in Messiah’s rule.

BUT how does this title help John

when there is no evidence –

at least, no visible evidence –

that Jesus is victor and sovereign?

The answer lies in the astrophysical phenomena of the morning star.

That night in Colorado, I was reading a book entitled, *Idols of Our Time*,

written by a former member of the Dutch Parliament

and Professor of Economics named Bod Goudzwaard.

That night I read these words:

“The morning star often appears between two and three at night,
when the darkness is complete,
and the faintest sign of the morning
is not yet visible” (98).

Let me read the words again.

“The morning star often appears between two and three at night,
when the darkness is complete,
and the faintest sign of the morning
is not yet visible.”

Goudzwaard continues:

“So small that it threatens to vanish,
the star seems unable to vanquish the overpowering darkness.”

Is that not how it often feels?

“Yet, when you see the morning star,
you know that the night has been defeated.”

There still may be 4 or 5 hours of night to go ...

but when you see the morning star,

you know that it is just a matter of time

until the sun rises.

“You know that the night has been defeated.”

Then Goudzwaard writes this:

“For the morning star pulls the morning in behind it”

isn't that a powerful image?

“For the morning star pulls the morning in behind it,

just as certainly as Jesus pulls the kingdom in behind Him” (99).

**Do you see now why Jesus uses THIS title
as His last recorded word to His church?**

The morning star only appears

when the night has reached the deepest darkness.

But the morning star appears

long before there is any tangible evidence that this is the case!

Jesus is saying to us:

“Do not judge by appearances:
‘things are not only as they seem.’

Because I have come;

because I have been born into the darkness;

because I have lived your life and died your death,

and been raised from your grave;

because I am alive;

because I am here with you –

faint as My presence may seem –

you know that contrary to appearances

the night has been defeated.”

“Set the present moment in light of the unseen realities of the present.”

In using the morning star title

Jesus is declaring His victory.

He is declaring that the Messianic Age, the age of the Kingdom, as begun.

The night is almost over.

The Day is very close at hand.

Then WHY ... after His coming,

after His declaration to John and to us,

do the powers of the night still have such influence?

Did John get it wrong?

Did Jesus get it wrong?

Maybe His Gospel – “so small it threatens to vanish” –
is not all that powerful after all?

“No! A thousand times no!” says John.

The fact is, all the turmoil, all the upheaval,
is happening because His Gospel is true!

Really?

Yes!

The night is being invaded by the day ...
and the night is resisting with all its might.

As long as drug lords can operate in the night,
they go about their work calmly.

But once they are exposed,
once they are forced to work in the light of day,
they either repent ...
or do all they can to extinguish the light.

Thomas Torrance of Scotland puts it this way:

“It is because the Kingdom of God has already invaded this world
and it breaking up the kingdom thereof
that evil is provoked to such bitterness
and to its final desperation.”

The ferocity of the night

does not negate the claim of Jesus ...

it validates the claim!

The night knows it has been defeated ...

and it doing everything it can

to reverse the victory of the day.

“I Am the Alpha and Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End.”

“I Am the Root and Offspring of David.”

AND, “I Am the Bright Morning Star.”

He saves it for last so that we understand the present moment rightly.

When we see **Jesus the Morning Star**

we can dare to resist the ways of the night.

When you know that the night is almost over

you need not play the game by the rules of the night any more.

When you see the Morning Star – faint as it may be –

the night no longer set the agenda for our lives.

When we see **Jesus the Morning Star**

we can dare to walk in the ways of the Day.

We can now play by the rules of dawning day.

We can chose actions which the night judges to be naïve and weak.

When you see the Morning Star – faint as it may be –

the dawning light sets the agenda.

And, when we see **Jesus the Morning Star**

we can dare to hope.

When we see Him the picture – faint though He may be –

we can dare to hope.

“I Am the Bright Morning Star.

I know that often I and My Gospel seem so small

against the powerful ideolgies that seem to rule the world.

I know that often I and My Gospel seem unable to vanquish

the massive forces that seemingly run the world.

I know that often I and My Gospel seem so ... so irrelevant.

Look at Me.

Fix your eyes on Me.

For when you see Me in the midst of it all,

you know that the night has reached its greatest degree of darkness,

and I am even now

pulling the kingdom in behind Me.”