

The message given by Rev. Dr. Tom Zoelzer on Sunday, October 25, 2009 based on Revelation 21:1-6

Beginnings and Endings

October 31, 2017 – one of my goals in life is to be alive on October 31, 2017. I think I have a pretty good shot. It is only 8 years from now.

I want to be alive on October 31, 2017 not just because I have a great Halloween costume planned for that day, but because October 31, 2017 will be the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. I am a Christian in the Protestant tradition. So I am looking forward to celebrating that occasion.

October 31, 2017 is the day that a German priest and monk named Martin Luther nailed 95 theses – 95 discussion points to the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. This act began a religious reformation in Europe that eventually led to the development of Christian groups and church that were separate from the Roman Catholic Church which had been a driving force for religion in Europe for more than 1000 years at that time.

Martin Luther nailed those 95 theses on the church door because he was alarmed and upset about how current church practices, in his opinion was not being faithful. His cause was about a practice that the Roman Church was conducting at the time called “indulgences.” At the time, people were taught that after death, they went to purgatory before they could go to heaven. Purgatory was a place of punishment and waiting based on what you did or didn’t do in life. Indulgences were pieces of paper you could buy to reduce that time of punishment once you had been

forgiven of your sin. At the time, indulgences were being sold to raise money to rebuild St. Peter's Basilica in Rome.

All of this was too much for the parish priest, monk, and New Testament scholar, Martin Luther. He had people not showing up for church or confession because they had a piece of paper that they felt excuse them from confession anymore. He had been reading and teaching the New Testament that talked about the graciousness of God and the free gift of God's forgiveness because of Jesus.

If God's grace is free, he reasoned, how could you sell it for money? This argument lit a match to religious and political unrest in Europe that changed the landscape of Christianity and political power in Europe and eventually affected what was shared with the rest of the world. He and others, after being excommunicated from the Roman Church, started their own churches that they hoped better reflected the ways of Christ and the first Christians.

After a while, these Christians became known as "Protestants" because in 1529 at a conference with the Emperor Charles V, it was decided that wherever in Germany there was a Lutheran prince, there could be Lutheran Churches but there also had to be Roman Catholic Churches as well. But it was also decided that where the prince was Roman Catholic, only Catholic churches could exist. The Lutheran princes got up and walked out of the conference in protest, and so anyone not Catholic was nicknamed "protestant" (those protesters).

Today there are Protestant Christians and Roman Catholic Christians and Orthodox Christians all claiming Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior

and all claiming they have some truth to share about God. After 500 years, the landscape of Christianity has changed much.

I want to be around in 2017 because I want to be part of the discussion of “was it all worth it” and “are we being faithful to God through Christ as the current day followers of Jesus Christ?” Every church and every follower of Jesus Christ needs to ask that question – Are we being faithful to the ways of Jesus Christ? 500 years ago the first non-Catholic churches thought of themselves as “reformed and reforming”. They realized that reformation is an ongoing reality – Are we being faithful to the ways of Jesus Christ today?

This is basically the question being asked in the book of Revelation. Revelation is the last book of the Bible. It was written by a man who felt he had a revelation (a vision) from God about how God will end history as we know it and bring heaven and earth together. Revelation was written some 60 years after Jesus had lived and rose. Much had happened between the time of Jesus and the writing of the Revelation including the city of Jerusalem being besieged by the Romans and the temple of the Hebrew people being burnt to the ground. Still today only the Wailing Wall remains of that temple.

By the time of Revelation, followers of Jesus were being recognized as different from the Jews, and in the Roman world, this was not a good thing for the Christians. All people of the Roman world had to worship the emperor of Rome as a god. Only the Jews had an exemption of this rule. Now that Christians were seen as separate from Jews, they were now not exempt from the rule. John’s Revelation was written during a time of

persecution when followers of Jesus were asked to acknowledge the Roman emperor as a god or die, be jailed or have their possessions taken. It was a time of hardship for those who accepted Jesus as their Savior.

Christians were considered different. They were considered different because they worshipped only one God instead of many, and they had dietary and religious rules that separated them from social events – They wouldn't eat meat sacrificed to another god for example. Revelation was written to the people of these seven churches in Asia Minor (now Turkey) – Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. It was written as a book of encouragement to keep the faith during hard times. Ephesus for example had a huge temple to the goddess Artemis where there would have been festivals that would have been grand community affairs. Followers of Jesus were not supposed to go. The people of the church in Smyrna just 35 miles from Ephesus were complimented for keeping the faith even though it caused an economic hardship. In that town, there was trade associations connected to local gods that Christians would not join thus hurting their livelihood. Pergamum was the provincial capital where Christians from all over Asia Minor would have been brought for trial and then execution if they did not comply. These were the realities for the followers of Christ in these 7 towns and the writer of Revelation both tries to encourage them and warn them what he thought was to come.

What most of us know about the book of Revelation is his vision of how God was going to overcome the powers of sin, death, and evil and get

all those who persecuted his people, especially those Romans and those who assisted them. Our scripture today comes at the end of that conflict.

It comes after the 4 horsemen of chaos are released from heaven - death, war, famine, and disease. It comes after a cosmic battle between the forces of evil represented by a beast and a dragon and the forces from heaven. Revelation is the only book in the New Testament that pictures Jesus as a mighty warrior on horseback holding a doubled edged sword leading the forces of heaven against the forces of evil. Everywhere else, Jesus is a teacher, suffering servant, and a champion of peace and love.

Revelation is definitely an image of a messiah that the Hebrew people would have imagined and Revelation relies heavily on Old Testament images of God and judgment. Because of all this different imagery, Martin Luther didn't want to include Revelation in his New Testament, but was convinced otherwise.

Chapter 21 is a vision of a new heaven and earth coming together after all this destruction and a restored city of Jerusalem coming from God where there is no temple, there is no death, there is no pain, and there are no tears. It is a perfect world where God and creation are one. This would have been wonderful news for those small bands of followers of Jesus who were being oppressed for what they believed. I believe that the writer of Revelation expected all of this to happen in his lifetime.

Revelation envisions a day that heaven and earth are one and that there will be a second coming of Christ. The New Testament speaks of this second coming frequently. So we also wait. But in the meantime, we can't just sit back and wait... Well, we could. Some advocate to just sit back and

let things get worse until God takes care of it. But the rest of the New Testament speaks about people of faith telling and demonstrating the good news of Jesus Christ so that the world more reflects the ways of God. I believe that new life and new possibilities are always at work with God through Christ.

Sometimes people ask me if or when the revelation of John will begin or take place. I always have to say, "I don't know. It is in God's hands. God gets to decide if and when and how and why. I just know we are called to be faithful, live in the light of Christ, and answer the question – Are we being faithful to the ways of Christ today?"

What is your vision of a perfect world?... My vision of a perfect world is a place of a just, caring world where people honor each other and help each other achieve their maxim potential. Is this too much to ask? What is your vision?

Jesus came to save and show us how to have life and have it abundantly. Jesus also gives us courage to overcome all the things that are holding us down or holding us back. Jesus is always our sign of new life and new possibilities.

Garrison Keilor, an American novelist and storyteller, tells about moving from the city in Minneapolis to a farm in a small town. He went not expecting a sudden delight upon arrival. He knew that the locals would be stoic, and indeed it took awhile for them to warm up to him. He went hoping for paradise, but after a winter of cold weather and a two week cold, it seemed allusive.

Then on May 2 he woke up at five in the morning after being able to sleep with the windows open for the first time in months. He got up, got dressed, went outside with the dog to the sound of thousands of birds. What he saw was the old red barn with cows in it, the granary full of oats, the empty chicken coop, the machine shed, the corn cribs full of corn, the pump house, hundreds of trees, beyond that fields plowed the fall before, and clear sky. He sat down and wrote: "Found paradise. I said I would and by God I have. Here it is, and it is just what I knew was here all along. I'm happy to be here."

I am happy to be here, and I am happy to have the grace of God to forgive me, the love of Christ to mold me, and the Holy Spirit of God to guide me. I am happy to be here to be part of endings and beginnings, new life and new possibilities, the alpha and omega, the beginning and the end. New life and new possibilities are always at work with God. We are always invited to be part of new beginnings in God through Christ! Amen.