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This Is Not the End

Rev. 21:1-4, 22-26

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Being the church is not easy. In fact, there is little that is more difficult than being the church.

Being the church requires flexibility. And that is never easy. The church is comprised of all sorts of people, involves countless languages, cultures, and backgrounds. To be the church with such an array of people requires flexibility. And that can be difficult.

Not only that, but being the church obliges us to get along. Indeed, Jesus demanded that we love one another. Obviously Jesus didn't fully appreciate what he was asking for. Some people seem almost impossible to love.

And that's not all. Being the church insists being counter cultural. As the church we don't buy into everything the media is selling. We have different values; different goals. We stick out like a peculiar people. It isn't easy being the church.

But here we are: the People of God, the church.

If you think being the church is hard enough – try being a leader in the church. Many of the youth with us today will be leaders. In fact one of you here today might well be General Secretary some day.

"For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ." 1 Cor. 3:11

I was at the MCA Annual Delegate Session this winter. I read their minutes from last year and noticed that the General Secretary then (Jack Suderman) indicated “that Canada is a tough place for the church” and that “leadership in the church is not for the faint hearted.” I thought to myself then that maybe I should have read these minutes before I consented to be the next General Secretary.

It reminds me of the story of the mother trying to get her child ready for Church on Sunday morning. After repeatedly yelling up the stairs – with no success, she finally burst into the bedroom – only to find covers pulled up over a curled body in bed.

“Come on,” chided mother, “It is time to go to church.”

“I’m not going,” responded the mournful voice.

Now mother was an enlightened parent and so quickly transitioned to a posture of reasoning.

“Well,” she said, “give me two reasons why you think you shouldn’t go to church.”

“For one,” came the voice buried under the covers, “I don’t like anyone at church. And for the second,” continued the voice, “the people at church don’t like me.”

The time was flying by quickly so mother simply concluded; “Well your going to have to go to church anyway.”

But before the covers could be yanked off the bed, the voice replied, “You give me two reasons why I should go to church.”

“For one,” responded mother, “you’re 35 years old.”

“And for the second,” she continued, “you’re the pastor of the church.”

Being the church can be difficult.

We have been looking at passages in Revelation this week. John was living at a time when being the church was not easy and when leadership for the church was not for the faint hearted.

Roman military ruled with a heavy hand. They squelched any uprising swiftly and with determination. On the positive side, it made the empire a place of relative tranquility. As a result, people in their gratitude, began to grant divine status to the empire and its rulers (Yeatts, 19). Emperor worship became increasingly common.

Yeatts, in his commentary on Revelation, noted an important clarification to the increasing popularity of emperor worship. The movement to worship the emperor was not something initially imposed by the Roman government. Rather, it was initiated as a response of gratitude by the people. To refuse to worship the emperor therefore, was seen by the people as unpatriotic and a political revolt.

At the time of John writing Revelation it might well have been during the reign of the Roman Emperor Domitian. Proclaiming himself as “Lord and God” Domitian was the first Emperor to ever identify himself in such a way. He also made the failure to worship him an official political offense. Christian and Jewish worship became illegal bringing the threat of persecution and perhaps even death. It wasn’t just a tough time to be a

leader in the church; it was a tough time to be church. Being a Christian was not for the faint hearted.

John was giving leadership at a time when many in the church had lost their lives or felt they were soon to lose their lives. As he wrote in Rev. 17:5, the great beasts were “drunk with the blood of the saints, the blood of those who bore testimony to Jesus”. Not a particularly inviting environment for new church planting efforts.

If you were a leader in the church in such a time as that facing John, what would you do? What would you say? How would you provide leadership? If you were living in such a time what would you want to hear from leadership?

The fact that you are here this evening would indicate to me that you are all leaders. You are swimming against the current. Although most of society has disregarded the church, you have not. Although many Christians have questioned the value of a larger corporate family of faith, you have not. You are here, and that makes you counter cultural.

I can imagine the lonely nights faced by John. Exiled on an island, left to die, he must have endured numerous emotional battles. Feelings of failure; worry for the church, must have been constant companions. Despair would have lured him, and anguish would have taunted him. Like the One he grew to love and serve, his heart too must have sighed; “My God, my God, why have you forsaken us?”

Our experiences as Mennonite Church Canada can make us feel that way sometimes too. We look for evidence of the Spirit of God as we discern

through difficult challenges. It can feel like we have been abandoned- abandoned by others, abandoned by our own children, and overlooked by God.

In environments like this it is good to look to passages such as Rev. 21. Revelation serves to remind us of two very important things. The first is that this is not the end. And the second is that the end belongs to God.

This is not the end

The book of Revelation is not an easy message. John was not telling the church to relax and that everything would be fine. The vision describes immense suffering and expects continued persecution. The Apostle recognized that terrible things were happening and that terrible things would continue to happen for those who acknowledge and worship Jesus Christ as their Lord. It was not a vision that promised an avoidance of suffering. But the vision was none-the-less, a message of hope and promise.

No doubt people wondered if this was the end of the church. Would the church be obliterated? Would faith drown in the blood of martyrs?

In our post modern, post Christendom context, people entertain the same thoughts. How much decline can the church across Canada experience before there is no one attending church anymore? What kind of community can be maintained if regular church attendance is now defined by monthly participation?

To the church in the time of Roman oppression and to the church in the time of oppressive consumerism, the message of Revelation is the same.

This is not the end. The story of God's engagement with the world does not end with us. This is not the end of God's redemptive, reconciling, restoring activity.

Our youth are a statement that the impulse of God's passion has not ended. Our youth will take the church places it has not yet been and boldly express the grace of God. There are still individuals who are convinced that God's love is not for them – the youth will be the church who sets them free. There are global systems and societal norms that have yet to be challenged by a bold declaration of the Gospel of Peace – the youth will be the church who will speak the unthinkable and risk doing the unimaginable.

Being the church has never worked well for the faint hearted. Jesus clearly indicated that misunderstanding, misrepresentation; indeed even persecution would always accompany the church. The church will always be counter cultural.

It is not intended for the faint hearted. So God has promised that the Spirit would fill us with courage; fill us with hope; saturate us with songs of peace. How else could early Anabaptist martyrs sing songs of faith as they marched to their death? It is the Spirit of Christ in us that refuses despair and defies death itself. We may die – but this is not the end. That's the message of Revelation. No matter what is going on; no matter how bad you think things may be getting – this is not the end.

The end belongs to God

The second thing that Revelation reminds us is that the end belongs to God. It is God who will determine the end. And God's ending includes a new heaven and a new earth. God's ending is complete restoration and

thorough healing – when true peace will rule. Such an ending only God can assure.

This is the confidence that is ours as the People of God. Whatever the context; whatever the strains and tensions surrounding us; as in John's case, despite the death and persecution – we must always remember God's future. It is God who determines the ending.

For now we struggle. For now we strive for greater healing of fractured relationships. For now we struggle against the principalities and powers. Sometimes it feels like hatred cannot be defeated. Sometimes it feels like the frenzy of war will never be thwarted. Sometimes it feels like the cry for justice will never be given its hearing.

But this I know, my friend. This is not the end. I remind myself of God's future. I remind myself that the ending belongs to God. One day, there will be a new heaven and a new earth. One day the dwelling of God will be with us to such an extent that the brilliance of God's glory will cause all other light to disappear. One day God will wipe away every tear from our eyes. And when that day comes, there will be no more death, no more mourning, no more crying, no more pain. When that day comes, the old order of things, marred by hatred, strife, injustice, and greed – will pass away.

For now we struggle, swimming against the current, defying the calls to abandon hope. For now we refuse the easy way out. We are the people of God. We are not the faint of heart. We receive the filling of God's Spirit bringing hope, courage, boldness, and confidence.

It may seem like the church sometimes takes a few steps backwards. But the Spirit of God within us reminds of God's future. It is not for tyranny to declare the end. The end belongs to God. It is not for despair to proclaim the end. The end belongs to God. It is not for fear to declare defeat. The end belongs to God.

The Spirit will remain active until God identifies the end. Until then the church will stay aligned to the activity of God's Spirit. And what glorious activity it is. The proud will say, "I am sorry". The beaten will say, "No more". The polluted will be cleaned. Rivers will run clear. Hearts will be made pure. What we can't say in English we'll say in Spanish, French, Hmong, Cantonese and a host of other languages.

Faith will always have its children. Youth will always lay claim to conviction and commitment. The passion of God to restore and make things right in the world will always rise up within the hearts of God's people.

We are the church.

This is not the end. The end belongs to God.

Amen.

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Yeatts, John R., 2003. *Revelation: Believers Church Bible Commentary*. Eds. Elmer A. Martens and Willard M. Swartley. Waterloo: Herald Press