

**The End of the Story**  
Revelation 12:7-12 and Roman 15:13  
Celebration of the Rev. Jennifer Ikomo Motzko  
Rev. Dr. Zina Jacque, Community Church of Barrington  
July 1, 2018

**OPENING PHRASES**

Beloved of God, what a blessing and honor to stand in the presence of God in this place. What a blessing, also, to share in worship with Pastor Tim, Dr. Hunter, with you, the people of First Baptist Seattle and with my sister in ministry, Pastor Jennifer and her beautiful family.

Now, in Deuteronomy, God says to Moses, the word of God is near you, even in your mouth, that we may hear and obey it. So, let me move with quickness to connect the word of God from Revelation and Romans with a rule I learned and broke early in my life, with the world in which we live and with what this prompts me to say to Pastor Jennifer on her last Sunday at Seattle First Baptist. Before we begin, let us pray.

**PRAYER**

Good and gracious God, bend low this morning and open the lips of this your daughter, that my mouth may speak your words. Open the hearts of your people that your wisdom may settle like ripe seeds on good ground. Open us each, kind and loving God, to the transformative power of your presence in this moment of worship. We pray, believing, in your name. Amen.

**SERMON**

Beloved, when I was a child one of my very favorite places to be was a tiny, one room local library. Mrs. Hannah was the librarian and she loved being there too. She would sit with us children and show us the best books. She would encourage exploration and journeys beyond anything available in East Chicago, Indiana. And, though she had few rules, she had one that she taught each of us. She taught us that we should never turn to the end of a book before we had earned the right to read the last page. She taught us to love the rhythm the author intended; the ups and downs, the scary parts, the parts we could not figure out. She taught us to love the mystery and even the parts that seemed dark and dangerous. She taught us to relish the journey of reading an entire book and the privilege that comes when you earn the opportunity to turn that last page and to find out what happens at the very end.

I started going to that library all by myself in second grade. And by the time I was nine, Mrs. Hannah let me roam through the books on my own, choosing what I wanted to read. And I honored her by following her rule. No matter how hard it was, I never turned to the end of the book before its time. That was until I met a book written in the late 1800's. Some of you, who are of an age, will remember the book. Some of you will remember the movie, starring a young Shirley Temple. It is the story a little swiss girl named Heidi.

Now, if you do not know the story of Heidi let me give you the quick synopsis. The story begins as Heidi becomes an orphan. Her parents are killed in an accident and her evil aunt, wanting nothing to do with Heidi, takes her to live, high in the Alps, with a reclusive and not so kind grandfather.

But as the plot would have it, Heidi's warmth and light slowly melts the hardness of her grandfather's veneer and her love for him brings out his true and gracious self. Their love is brilliant and their world brightens in ways that only love can provide.

But then, the evil aunt shows up again, and for the love of money and opportunity, she snatches Heidi from her grandfather and sort of sells her off as a companion to a young girl who can no longer walk. Heidi is again separated from those who love her. She is again in an alien place. She is again without the warmth of love and under the oppressive hand of a housekeeper who does not care for her, under the oppressive hand of a power that mistreats her; a power that she cannot change and does not understand.

Heidi, in this portion of the book, seems without hope, seems without agency, without advocates. And, it gets worse. The book is over 200 pages and so, I cannot share all of its twists and turns but, suffice it to say, many awful things befall Heidi. In fact, before I was half way through the book there had been so many heartbreaks, so many villains; my nine-year old self could barely continue to read. I kept turning pages, looking for hope. I kept asking would Heidi survive, *could she survive*, another loss, another chapter without love.

Then, at some point, I could not take it. I could not read of her misfortune any longer. I could not turn another page and suffer, with Heidi, another blow. And so, I did it. I broke Mrs. Hannah's rule. I turned to the end of the story and I discovered that Heidi made her way back to her grandfather. She made her way back to love. She even found a way to get the young girl who could no longer walk to stand and walk without the aid of anything other than her own spirit. Heidi did it. She made it. She triumphed and she shared her love with all around her and the world brightened in a way that only love can provide.

Beloved, today, as I look around our world, as I see children separated from their parents, as I see those who are sworn to serve and protect abuse and neglect, as I experience the power of hate made alive in the mouths of those chosen to lead, as I walk in spaces where evil seems to be the primary coin of the realm, as I watch willful ignorance being prized as something akin to moral excellence, as I turn the pages of my newspaper looking for hope, as I keep asking, will we survive, *can we survive another blow, another heartache, another betrayal*, as I feel myself reaching the point that I am sure I can no longer read the book of our current national life, as I find myself unable to turn the page because I am sure I will find more greed and misogyny, more bigotry and cruelty, as I reach this point, my 62 year old self, reminds me of the wisdom of my nine year old self and I remember it is time to break Mrs. Hannah's rule. It is time to turn to the back of the book and read the end of the story. And my friends, I want you to break Mrs. Hannah's rule with me.

I want you to break Mrs. Hannah's rule with me because I want us all to remember how our sacred story ends. I want us to be reminded that sweet children will not always be separated from their parents, parents who seek a better life. I want us to be reminded that those who are driven by division and hate will not always be in office. I want us to be reminded that those who speak of the grand sweep of human diversity as deviant will not always write the laws. I want us to be reminded that those whose god is greed will not always be in places of power. I want us to be reminded that that which is not of God, that which is evil and that which is devoid of love cannot remain ascendant forever.

And why do I believe this, because the story in Revelation 12 tells me that at the end of God's story, and that is the story in which you and I and all of creation are included, at the end of that story, the evil which first presented itself as a serpent in Genesis, and then reappears in Revelation as a serpent dragon, that evil, that seeks to devour souls, that is relentless, that lies to good people and blinds them with fear; this evil that in our day is palpable and almost unbounded; this evil is cast down and is defeated.

People of God, sometimes, like my nine-year old self, it is hard to keep reading. But just like my nine-year self, when we can no longer face the next page of this current story for fear of what we will find next, that is when we must break the rule and read the end of the story, read that God's love

- Love for neighbor
- Love for the stranger
- Love for the children
- Love for the least
- Love for the left out
- Love for the lost

God's love wins!!!!

But, you might ask, what enables us to keep on keeping on in the midst of these overwhelmingly challenging times? Beloved, that is where I draw wisdom from one verse from Paul's letter to the Romans.

As Paul prepares to close his letter to the church at Rome, as he encourages them to keep persevering, even in the face of daunting challenges, as it were he tells them to keep reading to the end, Paul offers three pieces of advice

Read with hope, read with power, read as community.

### **Read with Hope**

Be clear beloved, when Paul uses the word hope it always means a confident expectation of the coming good. If we are going to live in these days between now and the end of our story we have to be a people of hope. We have to be a people who hold in our hearts a firm expectation of the coming good. We may not see it, we may not be able to explain how, but as we read through these difficult pages of our today, as we read through them with a confident expectation, with hope, then we can find the strength to continue working for the good we seek. When we read our times with hope,

we can continue working for the good we desire. We must read with hope, it fuels our ability to go on.

### **Read with Power**

Paul tells us we have power, by the power of the Holy Spirit. My friends, we cannot combat that which rises around us as evil on our own. We battle not against flesh and blood, the writer of Ephesians tells us, but against spiritual powers of evil that exist in high places. We need the power of God's Spirit to fight our battles. We need the power that is accessed through prayer and through study. We need the power that comes in the silence of simply being before God. We need the power of the Spirit to keep reading, to keep working, to keep fighting, to keep believing and Paul tells us it is ours.

### **Read in Community**

And there is one more thing that the Romans text teaches us that is relatively invisible to the eye. Three times in Romans 15:13 Paul uses the pronoun you. But, each time it is plural. How do we keep reading, how do we keep making our way toward the glorious end of God's story with confidence? We do so in community, we do so together! Beloved, we move through the challenges of our lives alone. We cannot make our way through the seasons of difficulty and the moments of crisis alone. Jesus sent the disciples out two by two and formed *communities* of believers. We need each other to make this journey. We need each other to read our way to the end.

### **FOR PASTOR JENNIFER**

And Jennifer, what does this prompt me to say to you and Michael as you make your way back to the Midwest. It prompts me to say when the challenges that face you seem to be too much, when story around you seems dark and even dangerous, break Mrs. Hannah's rule and read the end of the story again. Read the end of the story again so that you will remember that your side wins. God wins. Read, remember and go forward through the pages of your story with confidence. Go forward into your story and your days knowing that God has ordained every step you take. Live boldly for the Lord my sister, as you minister to your own soul first, to your family next and then to the people and circumstances God places in your path. Yes, live boldly, for the cause of Christ and the cause of the Kingdom and rest assured you will win.

### **CLOSING**

Beloved, what I propose today is hard work, continue to live in the story when the hope and the love of the last chapter sometimes seem so far away. But we must continue on because we know where we will end. And in the meantime, because we need strength to have hope, to be open to the spirit's power, to walk and work and pray and live though it all together, because we need strength, I want to invite you to the table, to come and dine. To eat your fill, to receive from Christ, provision for the journey so that we can, together, with hope, continue to see what the end of the story shall be. Amen.