

## Endings and Beginnings

We've spent the last three weeks in the Book of Revelation. It's probably one of the most misunderstood and misused books in the Bible. Ironically, it's also one of the most read. Graduation is often called "Commencement," and what a strange word that is for something that feels like it's wrapping up. On this Graduation Sunday, as our graduates reflect on the courses they've finished, the exams, the essays – they'd like to think they've reached the end.

But today, as we get ready to read from the last chapter of the Bible – Revelation 22 – we find that things aren't over. In Christ, the end is never the end. It's a new beginning. If you have a Bible or Bible app handy, turn with me to Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17, 20-21. **Read Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17, 20-21.**

John wrote the book of Revelation while he was imprisoned and forced to work in the salt mines on the island of Patmos, a small rocky island off the coast of modern-day Turkey. He writes the letter to followers of Jesus who faced persecution for their faith – like he was facing, and some faced worse. Christians were routinely crucified, used as human torches, thrown into pens with wild animals, forced to work in what we would call slave labor camps today. Through all this, Jesus speaks to John in a vision while John's on the island.

He says, "Look, I am coming soon! My reward is with Me, and I will give to each person according to what they have done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End," (Rev. 22:12-13). It's a word of encouragement to John, and those early Christians who were being persecuted and killed for their faith. It's a word of encouragement for us today – and especially for brothers and sisters in parts of the world like western Africa, the Middle East, and south and east Asia, where even today Christians are persecuted and killed for following Jesus Christ.

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, said that grace always draws us forward. From prevenient grace before we even knew God, to justifying grace when we first believed, and sanctifying grace that calls us toward holiness – completeness, or Christ-likeness. Graduates, your recent graduations aren't your finish lines. They are holy invitations to become one with the mission and the heart of Jesus Christ.

## Revelation – a Call to Hope, Not Fear

For well over three hundred years, Christians have tried to interpret the end times through Revelation. Some turned it into charts and timelines. Others treated it like a spiritual horror story – the idea of being "left behind" sells a lot of books! John Wesley reminds us that the Scriptures are meant to be "profitable for salvation," what he

means is, it's supposed to bring us closer to Jesus. To draw us into deeper relationships with Him.

The last chapter of the Bible isn't about fear. It's about invitation. John records these words from Jesus, and then a response from the Spirit and the Church:

I, Jesus, have sent My angel to give you this testimony for the churches. I am the Root and the Offspring of David, and the bright Morning Star. The Spirit and the bride say, "Come!" And let the one who hears say, "Come!" Let the one who is thirsty come; and let the one who wishes take the free gift of the water of life, (verses 16- 17).

Jesus wants anyone hearing about John's vision to understand that it's coming from Him, so He identifies Himself by name here. And three times, we're told to come – to come to Jesus. That's the message of grace. It doesn't say to go run and hide. He tells us, "Come and live."

John Wesley believed that God's grace is freely offered to all people – even those who don't yet know Him. There's an anecdotal story about Wesley's missionary work in what's now the State of Georgia, in the mid-1700's. He was preaching outdoors, and the Native Americans came to see what all the commotion was about. And when Wesley celebrated the Sacrament of Holy Communion, he let the Native Americans receive the sacraments, even though they didn't know what he was saying. They didn't know what any of it meant.

Wesley believed that by letting the Native Americans receive the Sacrament, that in God's own mysterious way, their hearts would be opened to the Gospel message and they would be saved. That's one reason the United Methodist Church celebrates an open table today. In the receiving, God softens our hearts and makes us better image-bearers of Christ.

The invitation to eternal life, to the Tree of Life, isn't reserved for popes, bishops, nuns, and pastors. It's extended to ALL who thirst. That's good news for us! That's also good news for uncertain graduates who aren't sure what's next. The Spirit, and the Bride – the Church – are still saying, "Come." Come and become what you were created to be.

## **Becoming One with Christ**

Jesus also says here, "Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and may go through the gates into the city," (verse 14). Ultimately, we choose to receive and life into the cleansing power of God's grace. Wesley taught – and this is important to talk about as the Church today – salvation wasn't just about going to heaven. It was more about becoming more like Jesus right now. He called it "Christian perfection," or perfect love.

To “become one,” is to grow in love for God and neighbor, to have holiness of heart and life, and to be in united with Christ’s mission for the world – that is to make Him known to all people. Because of free will, each of us – including our graduates – must choose to respond to God’s grace. God never forces. He invites. So graduates, as you step into this next chapter of life, the question for you isn’t just, “What job will I have?” or “Where will I live?” The real question you must answer as a follower of Jesus is this: “Am I becoming more like Jesus? Am I becoming one with His purpose for me?”

## **Becoming One in Community**

Graduates, you are entering a new phase of life – college, career, service, or exploration. Others here in our church family are also entering new phases of life. Looking ahead to new jobs, new opportunities, or maybe some much anticipated and deserved time in retirement. All this means change. Change often comes with questions and anxiety.

The Scriptures and our faith remind us that we are never alone in the process of change. Sanctifying grace is the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit shaping us into better image-bearers of Christ. It means that even when we feel like we’re wandering and lost, God is still working. Holiness is a journey. Your calling isn’t a one-time revelation – it’s a process of walking with God. Becoming one isn’t just a single decision made one moment in time. Following Jesus is a way of life. So don’t be afraid of the new beginning. God’s grace has carried you through this far – and will carry you on!

And along the way, you’ll meet people. Some of them will be alright, and others, not so much. John Wesley said, “There is no holiness but social holiness.” Becoming one with Christ also means becoming one with others. We do that by living in authentic Christian community.

In authentic Christian community we hear the Spirit and the bride, together, saying, “Come.” It’s a corporate invitation, and a reminder that we need each other, and we need the Church. Graduates – don’t journey alone! Even when you are far from home here at New Hope, find the Church everywhere you go. Serve others. Stay plugged in with the community of followers of Jesus. And be involved! Become the change you want to see in the world. Keep asking how your gifts – your music, your ideas, your passions – can be part of God’s redemptive work in the world.

Notice how the Good Book ends. “He who testifies to these things says, ‘Yes, I am coming soon.’ Amen. Come, Lord Jesus. The grace of the Lord Jesus be with God’s people. Amen,” (verses 20-21). It ends with a prayer: “Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!” And a benediction: “The grace of the Lord Jesus be with God’s people.”

That grace is with us today. It’s with you, today, graduates. It’s brought you to this moment. And it’s calling you forward – to become one with Christ, with His Church, and

with the world He loved so much that He went to the cross for it to save it. As we prepare to celebrate you, we also send you. With joy. With prayer. And with the full assurance that you are part of God's great story – not at the end, but at the very beginning.

**Prayer:** God of boundless grace, You call us to drink freely of the well of life and to share Your love with the world. May the glory of Your love, made known in the victory of Jesus Christ, our Savior, transform our lives and the world He lived and died to save. We ask this in His name and for His sake. Amen.

## **Graduate Recognition**

At this time, I'd like to have our graduates come up here with me. We want to recognize them, not just for what they've done, but for who they are becoming. I have had, for the last several years, since before COVID when Kendra and I were doing youth stuff somewhat of a tradition of reciting the first stanza of a poem for graduates. In the 1870's, British poet Arthur O'Shaughnessy wrote *Ode*, a nine stanza poem that basically runs the gamut of human history. Its first line was made popular by Gene Wilder in the 1970's movie, *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*:

We are the music makers,  
And we are the dreamers of dreams,  
Wandering by lone sea-breakers,  
And sitting by desolate streams; –  
World-losers and world-forsakers,  
On whom the pale moon gleams:  
Yet we are the movers and shakers  
Of the world forever, it seems.

Graduates, you are the dreamers and the doers. You carry God's image, and you carry the hopes of your families, and your church family. You will shape the world, and we believe the Spirit of Christ will shape you as you go.

New Hope, I'd like to commend the following graduates of the class of 2025 to you now:

Marissa Berryman is a graduate of Sidney High School. She will be attending Wittenberg University in the fall, and will be entering their pre-med program of study, to become an emergency physician.

Ryan Michael is a graduate of Christian Academy School, and participated in the co-op program which allowed him to work with Raterman Construction where he assisted them with blueprint drawings. He will continue working at Raterman and will also attend Edison State Community College to pursue a CAD certificate and business degree.

Kierstyn Oberdorf is a graduate of the University of Findlay, receiving a Bachelor's degree in Animal Science. She is applying for Veterinary School, and is working full-time for an animal research company.

Graduates, as you go out to “make music” and to be the “dreamers of dreams,” always remember that Jesus loves you! As a church family, we bless you. We commit ourselves to walking with you in prayer. We take great joy in your journey. We are always here, and get great happiness in being able to see you. And we remind you: You are becoming one – with Christ, with His people, and with His kingdom purpose for your life.

**Prayer:** Loving and Faithful God, Thank You for the gift of this day and for the opportunity to celebrate our graduates. You've walked with them through every challenge and triumph, and today we honor the work You've begun in their lives. As they move forward, continue to guide them – to seek Your will, to trust in Your timing, and to shine Your light wherever they go. Bless them with courage, wisdom, and faith. And remind them that this church is their home, and You, O Lord, are their constant Companion. In the name of Jesus Christ, our risen Savior, we pray. Amen.