

On the vacation from which Patricia and I just returned, I played three rounds of golf, which were my rounds two through four of the year. Had you told me before I left that my scores would be as decent as they (somewhat misleadingly) were, I would not have expected it, but if I had, I would have had them in the reverse order in which they occurred. I would have expected my best score on my last round, not on my first, yet my third round was far and away the worst of the three and the first, especially its last six holes, definitely my best.

Moral: We don't always have to wait until the end for something good to occur.

Which I guess is why I wish everyone were aware of the presence of God In our lives made possible through our belief in the Son of God, Jesus, the presence of God in the form of the Holy Spirit.
[affirmation]

And while the resurrection of the dead is at the center of our belief, because of that presence in our lives through our belief, we do not have to await death for ourselves to be changed by that faith, for our lives to be different; *we are changed* now. That the difference is something for now and not awaiting the future is shown in our reading from Revelation, as well as in our reading from the Gospel towards the end of today's service.

As we noted a few weeks back, our post-Easter Lectionary readings include excerpts from the somewhat puzzling book of Revelation, a detailed description — or is it? — of what will happen at that end of time. It may be about the “end of time,” about Christ's coming again, for some, but for me, and I am not alone in this, Revelation is more a “pep-talk,” more encouragement not to give up hope, encouragement to keep the faith as individuals and to keep the faith as Christ's Church.

“To keep the faith,” kind of like what I had to tell myself after my second triple bogey in those first eighteen holes. The writer, this “John of Patmos,” has visions in which he sees symbols assuring that all will ultimately end well for believers in Christ -- forget the number 144,000 business.

I would like to beg your indulgence for a few moments, because while the Book of Revelation is completely ignored by Calvin and largely so by Luther and others, there are clearly those who have become fixated upon it.

Going back not quite twenty years, there was a remarkably successful series of books and a movie that we know as the “Left Behind” series, and while part of its soundly denounced theology arises because of a passage in I Thessalonians, to which I will return again later, the idea of an *apocalypse* such as in the visions recounted in Revelation formed much of the “Left Behind” idea, which, in simplest terms, was that Jesus would return and take “to heaven” — which in my text I have put into quotes — the saints, while the unfaithful will be *left behind* awaiting the destruction of the earth. I have not read any of the books, so that is the limit of what I can say.

I used a term, *apocalypse*; the terms *apocalypse* and *revelation* originally had the same meaning: the way in which the ideas or teachings came to the writer, by being *revealed*, revealed by God with or without an angel intermediary, or revealed by Christ, as in Paul's "road to Damascus" experience of which we read two weeks ago. It is actually from the visions recounted in Revelation of an end-of-time scenario that we get the more contemporary concept of an *apocalypse* as "the end of the world" or a *cataclysmic* event.

But focusing on the cataclysm misses what I believe the writer of Revelation was trying to accomplish. Revelation is in the form of a letter to seven named churches in Asia Minor — today's Turkey, basically, — and while there is some criticism of several of the individual churches, apparently the real purpose of the letter was to encourage them to stand fast against a practice in the Roman Empire that had begun about one hundred years earlier, when Augustus Caesar, the first Emperor of Rome, had himself — or allowed himself to be — declared a god by the Roman Senate, setting the stage for similar declarations as a god to be sought by or for Caligula and Claudius and, at the time of the writing of Revelation, 90-95 CE, the then Emperor Domitian as well.

Citizens of the Empire were to worship the Emperor — which neither a Christian nor a Jew could, of course do. And the failure to worship the Emperor was one of the bases of persecution of Christians, and it is that this persecution — though it could prove fatal — was worth resisting for the Christians because of what would happen to them at the end of time, when Christ would return, that was the essence of the pep talk that is Revelation.

In other words, persecution was worth suffering, because of the reward *at the end*.

But our reading today suggests that we do not have to wait for the end of time, for a physical return of Christ, for life to change for us, because a change has already begun:

⁵ And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true." ⁶ Then he said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life. [21:5-6]

I am making; it is already occurring. In simplest terms, Right now, if we have faith in Christ, we are changed! We are changed, and here I am not a very good Calvinist, we are changed if we let ourselves listen to the voice of Christ within us, let ourselves listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit.

And it is not just the writer of Revelation who tells us that we do not have to wait until the end of time for our belief in Jesus to matter. In the Gospel of John — a different John almost without question — Jesus tells his followers to begin to live differently, to follow his commandment to love one another as he has

loved them. And in the Epistles of Paul, ah, let me take a moment to talk about the Epistles of Paul, the single largest part of the New Testament, and of his 1 Thessalonians, to which I referred earlier.

1 Thessalonians is probably the earliest of all the books in the New Testament, and I use it as a transition from the pre-Jesus Jews to Christianity, because it is clear that the concept of *resurrection of the dead*, first mentioned a bit more than 200 years earlier in the Book of Daniel, most certainly mattered to those early followers of Christ to whom Paul wrote his first letter — they were not yet called “Christians.” In 1 Thessalonians, Paul deals with the question of what would happen to those believers who died before Jesus returned, showing how imminent was the early believers’ expectation of when Jesus would return. Paul’s answer was that those who had died would be raised by Jesus and the first to accompany him to the kingdom of heaven — this passage apparently was very important in the formation of both the largely discredited theology of *dispensationalism* and the *premillennialist dispensationalism* of the “Left Behind” industry.

But while the eventual resurrection of the dead very much mattered to Paul, in his Epistles, Paul puts forth the idea that though Jesus will come at some future time, the Christian believer lives in what a professor of mine called the “already/not yet” state; Jesus has *not yet* come, but *already* we are changed.

We are changed, because faith can do that; we do not need to wait for the end-of-time for the resurrection of the dead that Paul expected — though by the time of his last letter, the nature of his belief in the timing of personal resurrection seems to have changed, for he speaks of indifference to whether he is alive or dead, since to be dead would be to be with the Lord, — we do not need to wait for the end-of-time for the resurrection of the dead that Paul expected for our lives to be changed, for they are changed now!

Changed now. I hope it is true for all of you, though I suspect it might be true only for some of you, true that you are aware of a quality in your life that exists wholly because of your faith in Jesus as the Son of God. *Changed* by a sense of feeling more compassion toward others; *changed* by the ability to offer friendship or help to another; *changed* by your ability to see through the shortcomings of others, because you are aware how your own shortcomings have been overlooked by a loving and compassionate God.

Not *changed* in the sense that you are perfect, that you no longer make mistakes, but *changed* in that you see the beauty of the creation that surrounds you; *changed* in that you see the presence of Christ in others, even if they are not yet aware that he is within them.

So while there are indeed Christians today for whom the pep talk of the John who wrote Revelation might still be important to help them withstand persecution — and in our pastoral prayer, we regularly name some of those places and peoples, — lets you and I remember the other part of that Revelation message, that *Jesus makes all things new*; that we do not need to wait until he comes again, because he is within us, and thus we have the power to live better and more joyous lives than we lived before we became aware of his presence.

If that is not exactly John of Patmos' pep talk, it is John of Tucson's pep talk.

We don't always have to wait until the end for something good to occur.

So I should have known better. When I returned from vacation, I figured it could wait two months before I equaled my best score from the vacation, but the day after returning I played in a non-profit — well, Tucson Illini Club — golf outing. I had my best golf round since 1991.

Nothing to do with religion, yet thanks be to God, and for his Son in whom all things are made new — now, — so that we do not have to wait.

Amen.