

Easter 7C: Revelation 22  
The Church of the Good Shepherd  
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May 29, 2022

### “History in Five Acts”

I saw a car a while ago that bore a bumper sticker that made me laugh: “Jesus is coming. Everybody look busy.” You always have to beware of bumper sticker theology, and this one was certainly made in jest. Though I’m not sure exactly who it was making fun of—Christians who expect to be raptured when Jesus returns, or people who say they’re Christians yet live as practical atheists and so will need to “look busy” when Jesus returns, or just Christians in general.

The day I saw this bumper sticker, I had just heard on the radio a report on Southern Baptists objecting to the Pentagon’s ban on evangelizing in the US military, and then an interview of a member of a liberal denomination pushing for the Boy Scouts to change their policy on gays in leadership. So reading the bumper sticker I immediately thought of these “activist” Christians, these Christians, whether they come from the Right or from the Left, who see their primary calling to be “changing the world.” They have a vision of what the world should be like and are unwilling to wait for God to make it so, so they take matters into their own hands, often resorting to politics and lawsuits and social media campaigns in order to bring about the “right” end.

I do not mean to suggest that there’s no place for Christians to work to make this world better, to promote peace and justice, liberty and virtue. Far from it. There is much that we can do to address suffering, hunger, ignorance, injustice, violence, racism and loneliness in our communities and in the world. God has given us plenty of resources with which to address them and we have a duty to use them.

The problem comes, rather, when we think that we are responsible for making things turn out right in the end, to make sure that the long arc of history does indeed bend towards justice. We often think that if we just had the right information, or the right technology or if we passed the right laws, or managed to secure the right structures or institutions or funding, then we could solve all the problems of the world. Only these problems, the “big problems” of our society, are not simply educational, technological or social problems needing educational, technological, or social solutions. They are at root spiritual problems, and accordingly they require spiritual solutions. As Paul says to the Ephesians, we struggle “not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this present darkness and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.” The problems we face are conflicts of a larger spiritual battle, a battle between God and the forces that seek to undo God’s good creation and thwart God’s plan of salvation. And against these enemies, we frankly have no power.

The Christians to whom John addressed the book of Revelation had a much keener sense of this than we do. The first Christians were a small, put-upon minority, subject to discrimination and persecution at the hands of the Roman authorities. There was little they could do to make their society “better,” or more “compassionate,” or more “just.” They were up against the might of the Roman Empire. For these Christians, God’s calling on them was simply to not give into pressure,

to be obedient, to give witness, and to pray. I say “simply” not because not giving in was easy or simple. Indeed, in many ways just remaining faithful in the face of opposition can be harder than trying to make the world better, for the world happily welcomes those who work for progress and social betterment.

What sustained the believers who did not give in was the assurance, provided in the book of Revelation, that God was not just fighting alongside them, but that the battle was already over and the outcome decided. “In the world you will have trouble,” Jesus promised, “but take courage, I have conquered the world.” Conquered, past tense. Jesus defeated the powers of sin, death and the Devil on the cross. He overcame the powers of evil, and now he sits at the right hand of the Father. And he will come again to complete his conquest of this world and restore God’s perfect rule on earth as in heaven once and for all. As the Archbishop of South Africa Desmond Tutu said about the struggle against Apartheid, “We’ve seen the end of the story. We win!”

We have lost our appreciation of this fact in our culture’s can-do approach to life. It might be helpful, as Samuel Wells suggests, to think of salvation history as a play in five Acts, like a Shakespearean play.

The first act is Creation. Out of love, God made order out of chaos and called all things into being, the galaxies and planets and every living thing from the tiniest amoeba to the largest whale and everything in between, including us humans. The chief purpose of these creatures is to glorify their Creator and enjoy him forever. But the first humans, our ancestors, misused their freedom, acted selfishly. So they fell from grace, and alienated themselves from their Creator.

God longed to be in true relationship with his creation through that part of creation that apprehended his glory—namely, humankind. But again and again, humanity failed, with Adam, with Babel, with Noah. So in the second act—Israel—God did something different. He singled out one man Abraham, and made a solemn commitment to him. The Lord would be his God and Abraham’s family God’s people, chosen by God for the salvation of the nations. The rest of the Old Testament is then a love story, in which Abraham and his descendants, the people of Israel, strove with God, unable to live with him and unable to live without him, unable to maintain the kind of life that honored God’s call to be holy. Yet God would not leave Israel alone, repeatedly wooing and wresting Israel back when she strayed.

The third act is Jesus. This is the definitive act. It stands at the center of the drama, where the Author enters the story, where God ultimately reveals his character. In Jesus all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell. And through his life and death and resurrection, Jesus opens the way to eternal life.

This brings us to fourth Act, the Act we presently find ourselves in. Israel thought it was in a three-act play, creation-Israel-Messiah, and so they were shocked when the Messiah came but declined to restore Israel’s political independence, nor did he bring the story to an end. Instead, he started another chapter of salvation, Act Four, the Church. In this Act, the Church is formed and given all we need to live as Christ’s body in the world. We are given the Holy Spirit and are clothed with power and authority. We are given the Scriptures and baptism, through which we

are drawn into the drama. We are given the Eucharist, the body and blood of Christ, by which we are strengthened to go out in mission and which sustains our life of faith, until we reach the final act, Act 5.

Act Five, the end, the consummation, is then still to come. In the end, God will transform the poverty of nature by the riches of his grace, turning our fallenness and striving and pain into communion and gladness and joy, as we've seen in our readings from Revelation. When the end will come is not known, but it will come when God chooses. There may be some shocks when this happens—as the secrets of our hearts are revealed. But in the revealing of God there will be no shocks, only surprises. For the God who will be fully revealed then in Act 5 will not be different in character from the God who revealed himself in Act Three, in Jesus. The God we saw on the cross is the same God seated on the throne, who will rule for eternity.

Now, as simple and straightforward as these five Acts might sound, there are two ways we can get the story wrong. The first mistake is to think we are in a One Act play rather than a Five Act play. In a one-act play, we become the makers of the world. Nothing has any meaning except for what *we* give it. All achievements, all results, all outcomes must be achieved and resolved before the final whistle, before the curtain comes down. The result is an approach to life that holds that “Whoever has the most toys/power/prestige before he dies, wins”. Living in a five-act drama means that we are spared that pressure. We are not called to be effective or successful, but to be faithful. Faithfulness is “effectiveness” measured against a much longer timescale, one that doesn't end until *the* end, until Act 5. So, we can afford to fail now, because we trust in Christ's victory and in God's ultimate sovereignty, not in our success.

The other big mistake is to get the Act wrong, to think we are living in a different Act than the one we are actually in. The mistake of thinking we are in Act 3, for instance, is to confuse our own role with that of Jesus. When we think we are in Act 3, everything we do has *decisive* significance for the world--and even for God. This point of view is always fashionable—everyone likes to think they live in significant times, that what they do has momentous importance. But the shape of the Five-Act play reminds us that we do not live in particularly significant times. The most important things have already happened.

Similarly, when we think that we are living in Act 5, we see ourselves at the end of the story and we are tempted to see our role as making sure the story ends right. But the story of salvation is not an enigma that God has left the church to figure out. We live *within* the story, not at its end. The end, as we've seen in the book of Revelation, comes from God. Revelation makes it clear that God's will, the end of sin and death, heaven come to earth, God dwelling with his people, will come as God's achievement. We do not make it happen. The story ends when and how God wants it to, regardless of whether the church has “guessed right” or “performed faithfully” or not.

You can see how important it is to make sure we get right the Act we are in. When we get the act wrong, we overestimate our role and often make matters worse, hurting ourselves and others, as we force our will on the world, seeing ourselves as its saviors.

Now, let me be clear, I'm not advocating for a pietist approach to society, retreating from issues of power and justice to focus only on “spiritual” matters. I'm not saying that we should just sit

back and wait for God to bring everything to a close. I repeat, I am not saying there's no place for working to make this world better, for working for peace and justice, liberty and virtue. We indeed have a role to play in God's story, even if it is not so grand as we think. We are not called to "fix" the world, or make sure that justice prevails and good wins out in the end. Our calling is much narrower, though no less demanding. Our calling is instead to be obedient, to give witness, and to pray.

When I was a teenager, in my youthful idealism, I would rage against the injustice, the unfairness of things and the foolishness of those in power. I know, I was a handful. My father would just smirk and remind me of the Prayer of Serenity. You know how it goes: "God grant me the patience to accept the things I cannot change, the strength to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference." There is indeed some truth, some practical wisdom, in that prayer. But it is not the whole truth. When we are powerless to effect change, as we often are, we are called to be patient, yes, but we are also called to pray, to pray, "Come, Lord Jesus."

Indeed, we are to pray and to expect an answer to our prayers. "Surely I am coming soon," Jesus promises. And when he does return, we are not supposed to be found "looking busy" or to *be* busy designing and plotting out and building the kingdom, as if it's all up to us. For God's kingdom is coming, Jesus says, indeed is already here, in our midst. We may still see the vestiges of the old, dying world and may still suffer from them, but make no mistake Jesus has conquered the world and will return to transform it by his true and gracious rule. Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!

The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you all. Amen.