

## **The First and the Last, the Almighty**

Rev 1:8, 17-18

A sermon for the First Sunday after Easter

Revelation 1 presents a panorama and we find one theme: Rev 1:8: "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Almighty." Again in vs 18: "I am the first and the last, the living one; I died and behold I am alive for evermore. I have the keys of Death and Hades." Alpha and Omega are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. The chapter is really saying: The Lord is Lord. There is no other lord. The Lord is lord.

How can that be? As we follow the debate about evolution, those who are attacking the idea that there God is involved point out again and again: If God was involved, it didn't work out very well. There are all kinds of awful things and problems. This is hardly God guiding creation, whether you say in "one day" or in "seven days" or "seven ages." He didn't do it very well. Furthermore, if Lord is Lord, how come there's evil? There are tragedies in our individual lives and tragedies and catastrophes in our country and beyond. Why doesn't the Lord make it right?

We have in Revelation 1 the challenge — "To justify the ways of God to man," as the poet Milton put it in the beginning of his great poem, "Paradise Lost." The Lord is Lord.

What about creation? Did it happen in one day? Seven days? Or many days, many millennia? First of all, we remember the Lord creates in the twinkling of an eye and he could have created all the books in all the libraries and all the geological strata, and all the memories we have in our heads in a twinkling of an eye. That is not a question of what he could do. It is what he did do.

The same is true for the problem of evil. People say God is supposed to be good and supposed to be love and supposed to be gracious. Why didn't he just wipe evil away? Why doesn't he just make it right? Why doesn't he prevent the tragedies and suffering that afflict us and others?

The answer is: Sometimes Scripture seems very strange. Deuteronomy 32:39 states: "See now that I, even I, am he, and there is no god beside me; I kill and make alive; I wound and I heal; there is none that can deliver out of my hand."

Just as startling is Isaiah 45:5-7: "I am the Lord and there is no other, besides me there is no God . . . from the rising of the sun and from the west, there is none beside me . . . I form light and I create darkness, I make weal and create woe."

That makes it sound as if God does evil. How do we sort this out? We know that basically the Lord cannot and never does evil. What do we do with this problem of evil? We have to see what God has done.

In the Old Testament one of the most remarkable books is the Book of Judges. In the Book of Judges there are fifteen to sixteen judges or rulers over several centuries. There is a refrain throughout the book. The people are ruled and do well with their judge, and then they are tempted by idols and eventually they bow down to idols. They are captured by the enemy. Then they repent, and the Lord sends them another judge. This pattern repeats itself over and over again. How come they don't ever learn? How come they don't catch on that the Lord is Lord, and if you don't have the Lord as Lord, you have trouble?

The same thing is found in the Book of Isaiah. Isaiah 10:5 states: "Assyria, the rod of my anger." Or Isaiah 45:1: "Thus says the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus." In Hebrew "anointed one" means "messiah." In Jeremiah 43:10 the Lord refers to Nebuchadrezzar as "my servant." Cyrus and Nebuchadrezzar would have known nothing of the Lord but were used by the Lord to bring about his purpose.

What does this tell us about how God works?

In the New Testament we have the astonishing cross. How does it happen that the Lord does this? Why does he do it this way? People have speculated: Is the cross the worst kind of death one could suffer? Why not another kind of death, such as drowning? Or being skinned alive? That is worse than crucifixion.

He had his Son die on the cross. What does this mean?

The Bible does not ask the question "Why?" Rather, the Bible states "what" God did. The great temptation is to say God did not do it quite right.

In Job 38:4 the Lord speaks to Job, who was questioning God, and God says: "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?" Who are you to question me?

Paul, using Jeremiah 18:1-11, writes in Romans 9:19-24: "Who are you a man to answer back to God? Will the clay say to the potter: 'Why have you made me thus?'" It is ridiculous to question God and judge God.

All of this really has to do with the First Commandment: "You shall have no other gods before me." Our temptation is to say: Well now, there is a way that it should be done that is not the way God did it. We know better. There is a book, *God Above God*, about the limits we put on God because we think we know better. We think: This is really what God should do and this is really the way God should have done it. Then that becomes the god we really worship. What the Lord does is what he does and it is not for us to say why or what should have been done.

The New Testament does not go that way at all. In the Sermon of the Mount, it says that the Lord knows every bird that falls (Matt 7:26). He takes care of every blade of grass and every lily of the field. Does he not take care of you? (Matt 6:23-30). Then in Matt 7:7: "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find." It goes in Matt 7:11 to say: "If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!"

Paul sums it up in Romans 8:32: "He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all, will he not also give us all things with him?" That is the way the Lord works.

In 1537 Luther was at the point of death, and yet he wrote the remarkable Smalcald Articles. He was so sick that he could not even be there to sign them with the others. In Smalcald 3:8/10 he writes: ". . . God will not deal with us except through his external Word and sacrament. Whatever is attributed to the Spirit apart from such Word and sacrament is of the devil." The Lord works his way, and we know this through the Word and sacrament. Anything else is a temptation of the evil one.

Therefore we have this text in Revelation 1:8: "'I am the Alpha and the Omega,'" says the Lord, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty." And then Revelation 1:17-18: "Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one; I died, and behold I am alive forever more, and I have the keys of Death and Hades."

It is stated in another way in Hebrews 13:8: "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever." Or as someone has put in a slogan of day: "He is the still point of the turning world."

Paul sums it up in Romans 11:32-36: "O the depths of the wisdom and riches and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! 'For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?' 'Or

who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?' For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen"

And as Paul writes in Romans 8:37-39: "In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Amen