

Rev. Anne J. Scalfaro  
7 April 2024

10:30 a.m. MT Worship  
Second Sunday of Easter

Calvary Baptist Church  
Denver, Colorado

## ***“Beginning at the End”***

Second sermon in the Easter series, *“The World Made Well...”*

### ***Revelation 21:1-6***

New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition

*NOTE: A sermon is a spoken word event. This manuscript served as a guide but is not exact to what was preached in the moment.*

I am a new member of the Pastors Advisory Council for Bright Stars of Bethlehem, a nonprofit that supports the thriving of Palestinian people through education and the arts at Dar al-Kalima University (which is the first and only university of arts and culture in all of Palestine). It’s located in Bethlehem, and had, until last week, a satellite center in Gaza. The tagline for Bright Stars of Bethlehem is: *“Hope is what we do.”* Their vision? *“For all people of Palestine to have life in abundance.”*

Sounds like a dream, doesn’t it? Something out of Revelation 21...something that sounds nice, but that we cannot even fathom or imagine today.

Related to this work, I was in a meeting this week with the Rev. Dr. Mitri Raheb. Mitri served as senior pastor of the Christmas

Lutheran Church in Bethlehem for 30 years from 1987 to 2017. He is the author and editor of over 50 books, making him the most widely published Palestinian theologian. He is the founder and president of Dar al-Kalima University, and a founding member of Bright Stars of Bethlehem.

Mitri shared with us his dismay and the sense of abandonment that he and other Palestinians felt this week when President Biden chose to make a public statement to denounce the Israeli governments attack on the humanitarian aid workers from World Central Kitchen.<sup>1</sup>

“Finally,” he said, “the President [in a substantial way] expressed outrage and heartbreak at Israel murdering people, but it revealed to me and all Palestinians that the lives of those seven internationals mean more than the lives of the

<sup>1</sup> President Biden’s statement can be read here:  
[https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-](https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2024/04/02/statement-from-president-joe-biden-on-the-death-of-world-central-kitchen-workers-in-gaza/)

[releases/2024/04/02/statement-from-president-joe-biden-on-the-death-of-world-central-kitchen-workers-in-gaza/.](https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2024/04/02/statement-from-president-joe-biden-on-the-death-of-world-central-kitchen-workers-in-gaza/)

32,000 Palestinians that have been killed the last 6 months.”

Mitri’s tone as he spoke was not one of accusation or partisan politics. It was just deep and utter heartbreak. He is, of course, grieved for the 7 aid workers who died, and he is, of course, grieved for the hostages held by Hamas and the terrorist violence inflicted upon the Jewish people. And. He grieves for his people. Deeply.

In the West Bank, where he lives, Palestinians are on the brink of poverty. 200,000 work permits were cancelled by Israel, which means for those 200,000 people that travel outside of the West Bank to work in Israel, they can no longer do so, so they (and their families) have no income. Others who work in Bethlehem in the tourism industry are completely shut down as well.

In Gaza, in addition to the 32,000 women, men, and children who have been killed, 1.2 million people have been displaced or wounded. During Holy Week, the Israeli military erased the satellite cultural center of Dar al-Kalima University in Gaza. This, by the way, comes just weeks after I heard from Hanna Massad, the

pastor of the Gaza Baptist Church, that the church was completely destroyed in Gaza City.

Mitri shared that since October 7, the Israeli government and military has destroyed 11 Palestinian universities, 4 cultural centers, and 33 of the 36 hospitals in Gaza. And, people are starving.

One of Mitri’s colleagues, the Director of the Gaza Satellite Program, Rana (Rah-na) Albatrawi, said that when her family was fleeing from the north to the south, they finally got some flour, but they noticed it was brown not white. They ate it anyway. It made them incredibly sick; vomiting for days. This, mind you, in a place where there is no clean water, no food, no medical help. Rana later found out that the “flour” was brown and not white because fodder, that is, animal feed, was mixed in with it. Animal feed that the human digestive system cannot handle. If you hadn’t heard that story it could be because 87 journalists in Gaza have been murdered in the last 6 months, and a law was just passed to remove *Al Jazeera* reporters not just from Gaza and the West Bank, but even from Israel.

So, as we begin in earnest, our Eastertide series on *The World Made Well*, I want you to hear from a voice that knows better than I what it means to live in an *Unwell World*. This Easter message from Rev. Dr. Mitri Raheb is just four and half minutes long:

- Play YouTube Video (4:36) -

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*Rev. Dr. Mitri Raheb Video transcript:*

“As Palestinians, sometimes we feel like it’s one occupation after the other...like a never-ending Easter Saturday. And yet, when we feel that maybe God has abandoned us, it’s exactly at that moment that we feel his power and we become resilient. We know that God actually wants to give life in abundance. And we feel the Hope of Easter Sunday, even though the Saturday persists.

For us Palestinian Christians, this Easter feels especially fraught. We have long war and our ancient community, literally dating to Jesus’ time, is on the brink of extinction. But this Easter we bear witness to horrors never even imagined.

Our Ancient Christian community in Gaza, and with it, thousands of years of Palestinian culture and heritage disintegrates before our own eyes. Today we celebrated Palm Sunday, remembering Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem. While, we, the indigenous people are banned from entering the city.

In Jerusalem, violent Israeli extreme settlers have been trying to force Christians out of homes. Even before October 7, the attacks on Christian institutions, clergy, and processions have quadrupled.

During this Holy Week we focus our eyes on the Cross. If there is one symbol that best tells the Palestinian story, it is the cross. This is why so many Palestinian artists, Christians as well as Muslims, have depicted Jesus on the cross. Our Palestinian people have been carrying a heavy cross of occupation for decades. Often we feel abandoned, and we have cried “*Where are you God, why did you forsake us?*”

Our people in Gaza are not asking anymore, “*Where are you God, but Where is humanity?*” Humanity has failed them as they were led like

lamb to the slaughter. Human rights seems not to apply to them. Western countries cannot after six months even agree on a cease fire. Arab and Muslim countries have seem to have become numb. As we walk our Via de la Rosa, many Christian churches watch like Peter from afar, afraid of identifying themselves with our suffering people.

We in the West Bank are locked in our cities behind high concrete walls that has transformed our cities into panto stands with the streets leading out of our towns with huge road stones. We feel locked in by heavy stones, heavy occupation. And we keep asking, *“Who will roll away the stone?”*

We have been living for over seven decades, our Long Saturday. We keep asking, *“If and when, Sunday will come. If and when will our oppression end? When will we obtain our liberation, our freedom, to live in dignity and reach our full potential?”*

We are not waiting for angels to roll away the stone, but rather for people to hear the call for

justice for liberation and for peace. Imagine the impact we could make if from every corner of the world, our collective call for action, for a ceasefire, for liberation for all captives became impossible to ignore?

May we receive this Easter time the power to leave behind our fears and complicity and become agents of transformation. Let this Easter mark not just a day of celebration, but a day of mobilization. A day we choose to be catalysts for hope in action and for a long lasting, and a just peace.”<sup>2</sup>

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“We are not waiting for angels to roll away the stone, but rather for people to hear the call for justice, liberation, and peace... Let this Easter mark not just a day of celebration, but a day of mobilization. A day we choose to be catalysts for hope in action and for a long lasting, and just peace.”<sup>3</sup>

Calvary, this cry and this call—which we can hear from Gaza and the West Bank, from Ukraine, from Sudan, and from the corners of our own lives that

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<sup>2</sup> Rev. Dr. Mitri Raheb, “A 2024 Easter Message,” *Bright Stars of Bethlehem* (26 March 2024), accessed on

April 7, 2024 at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QsByXde8DrI>.  
<sup>3</sup> Raheb, *ibid*.

are full of suffering and tears and heartache and oppression and grief—this call is our backdrop for Revelation 21: the vision of the End, the End toward which we must work, not waiting one more day to begin our labor.

When the world is not well, when the world is awry, as it is today, we lament. And we often voice a longing that we just wish we could go back to The Beginning when the world *was* well. We long to return to a time when things were better, more whole, more just.

But, I wonder, when was that time? Biblically or historically?

Slogans like “Make America Great Again” are a myth. Since colonization—land theft, genocide, slavery, sharecropping, lynching, Jim Crow, internment camps, hate crimes, detention centers—America has *not been great* for our indigenous, black, Asian, Latinx, or LGBTQIA+ siblings. Throughout much, if not all of our history, America has actually been pretty horrific and horrifying for many people, and the harms of the past have consequences that still haunt and harm today. This truth does not negate the dream of our

country that we are a land of opportunity; it just proves that we have yet to ensure that the systems that enable those opportunities are equitable and just. The dream is not yet realized.

Our salvation—our healing—remember the word salvation has the root word of salve, meaning balm/healing—our salvation is in our present and in our future. It is not in our past. God is not calling us backward, but forward.

Even Jesus himself, even the Messiah who came to save and who gave individual grace for each and every one of us, even Christ when he rose from the dead on Easter, did not wipe his wounded hands and say, “*What’s done is done.*” No, he knew the work was not over and he went to his disciples huddled in fear and he breathed on them saying, “*Peace be with you...receive the Holy Spirit...my spirit...and go, spread this good news, be my hands and feet in the world.*” That same Spirit swept down in greater force on Pentecost, breathing into all of us today, as the Church, the call and courage and convictions to continue the work of Jesus that “*thy kin-dom*

*would come, on earth as it is in heaven.”*

Jesus knew, even post-Resurrection, the kin-dom had not yet come. He began the renewal and restoration, but he did not finish it. His life gave for us a powerful testimony of God’s radical, life-giving, self-sacrificing, journeying-in-solidarity-with Love.

The Hope and miracle of Easter is not a *new* love from God; it is the ultimate reminder of the truth of God’s very being and love for all of humanity that has been ‘with us’ since the beginning. The truth that, in the words of the Apostle Paul, “*Nothing can separate us from God’s love,*” (Romans 8.) Not even death.

The stone has been rolled away. The tomb is empty. The Spirit of the Risen Christ is loose in the world. And we, *we* are to have a risen vision of what the world can be, of what God deeply desires the world to be. We are to raise our eyes above what we see around us in the news—all the tragedy and horror—and see what God sees: love, possibility, hope, life, faith, justice, restoration, re-creation.

You know, even when we go back to the beginning, to our very beloved beginning, all the way back to Genesis when God created plants and animals and humans and called them “good,” when the Garden of Eden seemed to be the paradise we all dream of...even in *that* story—as hopeful and as grounding as it is for us theologically—it’s not really something we want to return to is it? None of our family or friends are there. We are not even there. Just two people and a lot of animals. Maybe the most extreme introvert/botanist/survivalist among us would love to harken back to the Garden of Eden, but to go back to such a state is to go back to before we existed.

Further to the point, remember that the Creation story was written in a time when the Israelites, the people of God, were really hurting, when they were oppressed. They created an origin story of goodness because they needed hope. This was not a reality they knew as they wrote, it was a reality they longed for as they suffered.

The dreams and visions of the Garden in Genesis are not unlike what John of Patmos describes for us as the very end of his revelation. John paints a

picture of what the End will look like. And the difference between the End and the Beginning, is that while we were not around at the Beginning at Creation, we actually have a Chance, an Invitation, a Challenge even, to be around at the End.

And I don't mean "End" like the *Left Behind* "end times" or other non-biblical ideas like 'the rapture.' Whatever John is describing here at the End, is not about some kind of grand destruction where 'the good Christians' escape up to heaven because they're true believers while the rest of us sinners and heathen are left behind as the world rots and smolders. No, this revelation—depicted as the beloved city of Jerusalem, the city where the Temple was and where God (the divine presence) was thought to dwell by the Jews of John's day—is about God coming and making Godself at home among mortals.

Sound familiar? *Emmanuel*, God with us. It's the Christmas story all over again—the incarnation. But the difference is that it takes us back even further to the Creation story,

when God breathed over the waters of chaos to create calm. Because we learn in Revelation that at the end there is no sea, no ocean. Why no sea?

“[Well, in Revelation], the sea's absence is what indicates the eradication of death, mourning, crying, and pain. [Because] as is true in other Jewish literature of the period, the *sea* is where the evil empires operate. [Earlier in John's revelation] we read that in the great war Satan takes his stand alongside the sea, and the wicked beast arises out of that very same sea (*Revelation 12:18-13:1*). The “beast” makes war against Jesus' followers and kills many of them. “The beast” is aligned with the great city, Babylon, which rides upon the beast's back. [Babylon is the occupier, the oppressor, which is code language for Rome.] The beast-ly empire conducts its military and diplomatic operations on the sea, just as it handles commerce on the sea. So in Revelation, the sea's absence is part of John's (and therefore God's) condemnation against an empire that uses war and commerce to oppress ordinary people.”<sup>4</sup> To remove

<sup>4</sup> Greg Carey, “Commentary on Revelation 21:1-6a,” *Working Preacher* (1 November 2015), accessed on April 7, 2024 at

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/all-saints-day/commentary-on-revelation-211-6a-4>.

the sea is to remove oppression, to remove chaos.

Through John, God declares, “*I am the Alpha and Omega, the Beginning and the End.*” John reminds us that God is always drawing close to us to dwell with us, God has always created and re-created with us, God is continually “making all things new.” The vision of the End has been God’s vision since the Beginning.

It’s us—it’s you and me, it’s humanity—we *are the ones* who are choosing not to live into this vision as a reality. “*The kin-dom of God is near,*” Jesus said. Near, yet oh so far away. It is near enough to us that God knows we could get there if we would just love one another and see each other as beloved images of the divine. If we did *that*, we would not kill one another or seek power over all else. But we are not there yet.

Calvary, as the Church today, we must decide to begin at the End. To realize that we know the End of the Story as God has written it. We *know* how God has declared things will be—there will be no more death, no more pain, no more mourning. God will be with us through all that and wipe the tears from our

eyes. And not only that, God will help re-hydrate us. God will give to all who are thirsty water from the spring of life, so that we are not so drained from our suffering ways of being that we, like an almost dead plant coming back to life after a good soak, can stretch up and out and feel the sun and receive life and nourishment and enjoy the newness of creation restored. And actually BE that newness ourselves.

Just as we talked last week about raising our vision and having a risen vision of the Risen Christ, I invite us today to anchor ourselves in THIS vision, THIS revelation as we work for *The World Made Well*. To see what God is showing us, that *the End* is where God is inviting us to Begin.

New Testament scholar Katherine Shaner reminds us, “So often we read [Revelation] as predictive of events to come. Yet the accepted scholarly definition of apocalyptic literature describes texts like Revelation as *revealing* rather than *predictive*. In other words, the vision John describes in these verses is not a view of the future from a crystal ball. No. Instead, John’s vision lets us see God’s [true and present] home



among us [now] but without the veil of human destruction and violence.”<sup>5</sup> John lifts up that veil that we have pulled over the world for us to see what God sees.

This gives a whole new meaning to having a Risen Vision, doesn’t it? What we need is to see what is already *here*, around us and among us, in between all the scenes of violence and despair and suffering, there are commercials for hope, aren’t there? Snapshots and previews of what our reality could be? Glimmers and shimmers of *The World Made Well*. They are here. Among us. Around us. Within us.

To say it one more way: Revelation 21 includes elements of Creation (no more sea). It includes elements of Incarnation (God dwelling with God’s people). It includes elements of Resurrection (death will be no more, I am making all things new). And, while taking all of these elements that are in our past, Revelation 21 uses them to reiterate the truth that God has been showing us from the beginning: that in the End, *all*

*will be well*. And that that End is actually here and now. All *is* well, IF we could just peel off the unwellness that we, and the world, perpetuate. Like a “paint by number” or “picture by sticker” book—we *can* reveal the Truth by our actions. The Truth of God’s love and God’s vision.

What if we lived this vision with courage and conviction? What if we stood up for justice and peace as automatically as we stand up to sing the doxology? What if we spoke up for those who are being oppressed as readily as we speak up for ourselves in a job interview? What if we called for ceasefire, for peace, as frequently as we say, “Hello” or “How are you?”

If we know that God desires for all things to be well, if we know *that* is the END of our story, then it’s up to us to hurry up and write our way to that ending. If life is a Choose Your Own Adventure Story, we sure are choosing a lot of extra chapters we don’t need. A lot of chapters of pain and violence and death and oppression and fear.

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<sup>5</sup> Katherine A. Shaner, “Commentary on Revelation 21:1-6a,” *Working Preacher* (4 November 2018), accessed on April 7, 2024 at

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revision-common-lectionary/all-saints-day/commentary-on-revelation-211-6a-3>.

So how do we move from the stories of Creation, Incarnation, and Resurrection—and not just celebrate them as things in our past that tell us where we came from—but revere them together as a Truth that is declaring who we are today...a people of Revelation, a people who are all about the unveiling of God's love in the world? A people who declare that we don't want to go back to the beginning but a people who want to get to the end? A people who want the fullness of God's self (Alpha and Omega) alive in our Story today?

Well, we write that Ending by taking risks. We write that Ending by letting go of comfort for the sake of courage. We write that Ending by beginning to proclaim a bold, audacious testimony of God's love and God's desire for each and every human life to be valued and adored and protected.

And lest we think it's too hard to begin, that all is lost, perhaps this story will make you think twice.

The Director of the Gaza Satellite Program for Dar al-Kalima University, Rana (Rahna) Albatrawi, had to flee to Egypt with her family. But other

co-workers of her remain in the southern parts of Gaza. She reported to us this week:

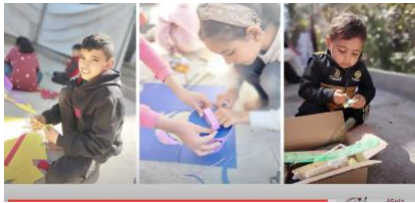
"The war has brought unbearable shock. Everyone has lost loved ones. Everyone is displaced from their homes. Everyone is hungry. Everyone feels like we are dead while alive."

"Everyone feels like we are dead while walking alive."

"So we made a conscious decision, that even as we were trying to keep safe, we made a decision that more important than safety – was life, was hope. We knew that we would try our best to be safe, but we knew that our end could not be safety. Safety is not salvation. We knew our ultimate end had to be hope, because where there is hope, there is life. So my team and I, we continue our work, even though our building has been destroyed and our homes are gone and our people are displaced, we knew we must continue the art. The art is what we know. It is what we teach. It is who we are. It makes us feel alive. We want to feel alive. We need to feel alive. We *deserve* to feel alive. Because we feel dead otherwise."

As her pastor Rev. Mitri says,  
*“Hope does not wait for a vision  
 to appear. Hope is vision in  
 action today.”*<sup>6</sup>

*- Scrolling through these  
 pictures as the sermon ends –*



So as they were fleeing, Rana and her team started to go to different shelters to see if children wanted to do art, and at first they just did art activities for the kids, but now they are getting requests to do more and more. So they are seeking out different shelters to bring art to the streets. The adults want it too. People risk being in the streets to do art. To be create. To be together.

She reported this week that her team is in Gaza City, doing pop-up art camps and activities and

<sup>6</sup> Rev. Dr. Mitri Raheb, *Dar al-Kalima, Vision in Action* (22 June 2018), accessed on April 7, 2024 at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6oW7Y83LL2Q>.

offering psychosocial services for kids and adults.

Rana concluded saying, “A lot of people talk about hope in the abstract. Hope is not a theory. *THIS* is hope. We *do* hope. The art is hope. It makes us alive instead of dead. This is the next generation of creative leaders in Palestine. This Is Easter. This is the world we must live in. The world we must create and show to the rest of the world so they see us as human, as resilient, as strong, as worth being alive.” People want us to believe that death is the end. Death is a given. But hope? Hope is the beginning of all things. It always has been.

Calvary, because we know how the Story ends; there is no ambiguity about what we must do to begin writing/righting our way there. Like Rana and her team, we must begin at the End—with hope, with courage, with convictions, with faith, with love.

Jesus did not point back to the creation story and say, “*The Garden of Eden is at hand.*” He said, “*The kin-dom of God is at hand.*” He pointed us forward, to a vision, to a dream. Of what he knew was actually really quite near to us, not far away,

but among us and within us already.

Amen.