

## A Sermon for DaySpring

By Eric Howell

*Bearing Hope*

Christ the King

November 24, 2024

I'm glad we sang *Crown Him with Many Crowns* today. A beautiful song. They don't make songs like they used to, I don't think. Not all old songs are good—there are some clunkers, but there are some amazing songs, too. I think the composer of that hymn must have been challenged by his youth group---dared to write a hymn with the word “potentate,” “ineffable,” and “sublime.” He said, “I'm on it.”

Today, this final Sunday in the church year turns our eyes toward Christ as King—the carpenter from Nazareth, the itinerant preacher of Galilee, the crucified one is King of our lives and sovereign of all creation. I find that when I ponder this mystery, I am amazed, and I am humbled. What does one do before a king but give allegiance and obey? But above all, what I am experiencing this year is the gift of assurance. He is a good King. The good king. If Christ is King of all, then there is hope in all things and forevermore. As another old hymn sings, “If Christ is Lord of heaven and earth, how can I keep from singing?”

The opening words in Revelation sure sing of Christ, turning our eyes upward to Christ in glory and in his glory, to sure and certain hope in Christ and in Christ's final victory over all trouble and despair.

As we turn our eyes to Jesus, we are helped along the way by the revelation given to and shared by the mystic Julien of Norwich centuries ago, “All shall be well. All shall be well. And all manner of thing shall be well.” These are the kind of words to cling to. They're the kind you can set your life upon, lest they slip through your fingers. A contemporary commentator wrote, “It is a magnetic line, as much in its soothing, repetitive sound as in its assurance of a future reality beyond our grasp. Today, it is a deeply grounding promise in the midst of a chaotic, painful world. Somehow, despite our current experiences, all will be well, and all will be well, and every kind of thing will be well.” (Mahri Leonard-Fleckman<sup>1</sup>)

But would Julien say the same thing today? “Perhaps,” we think skeptically, “if she were living a comfortable life, had access to health care, affordable rent, a secure job, and a happy marriage, she might.” Aren't these the elements that make things go well? When things are going well, even glass-half-empty folks have some idea that things may be ok. If not all manner of thing, then most manner of thing.

The glass-totally-empty folks may say, “If she weren't living such a comfortable life maybe she wouldn't be so optimistic. If she lived in a place where bullets are flying or where race

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2020/06/24/julian-norwich-believed-all-will-be-well-would-she-say-so-today>

is profiled or where food is scarce or where the nation's leaders do the worst things they can think to do to their people, maybe she wouldn't have the confidence: all shall be well."

But, in fact, that's pretty much exactly where she was living. In her context, the revelation she was given was not a soothing word born of a life of comfort; it was a shocking word of confidence from a place of suffering. How can this be, even she wondered, in the reality of pain, suffering, and human frailty? According to her own testimony, she spent 15 years immersed in a deep, faithful struggle to comprehend the divine meaning of the words that became her prayer and her identity. All shall be well wasn't an empty platitude; it was resolute faith.

It is the kind of faith born in those who celebrate Christ the King and who read Revelation in the Bible. When all is said and done, the image of Christ as king assures us that all shall be well just because he is king. This hope is rooted in the confident faith, or faith, even if it's not so confident at times, that in the end, when all is settled, God's got this. Is this not one of the consistent themes in the Bible from beginning to end? From Genesis to Revelation, God is the alpha and the omega. We need a lot of things in life and from our faith. This assurance may be the foremost. Like many of the men and women in scripture, we, too, can be afraid. God says, "Do not be afraid." We can be troubled. God says, "Peace be with you." We can be uncertain. God says, "Trust me." We can be dismayed. God says, "Have hope." We can feel powerless against the forces that bear down upon us. Christ is King. It is the conviction in the face of all evidence to the contrary: God's got this. The only people who can have this confidence are fools and mystics.

How about both? Julien was one. Another was Howard Thurman in the mid-20th century--one of the foremost civil rights leaders in thought, word, deed, and prayer, in a time before popular momentum swung toward civil rights. Thurman could see beyond what most were capable of seeing. He saw to the heart of the human condition with a living and ever-present relationship with God. He had faith in the faithfulness of God born through at least one childhood memory that stayed with him and made him who he was:

"One night I was awakened by my mother, who asked if I would like to see the comet." It was Halley's Comet, making its once-a-century pass by the earth. Howard's classmates were buzzing about it in awe and fear. There was a rumor going around their small rural community that the comet's tail was going to brush the earth and wreck world-wide destruction.<sup>2</sup>

Howard writes, "I got up, dressed quickly, and went out with her to the back yard. There I saw in the heavens the awesome tail of the comet and stood transfixed. With deep anxiety, I asked, without taking my eyes off it, 'What will happen to us when that thing falls out of the sky?' There was a long silence during which I felt the gentle pressure of her fingers on my shoulders; then I looked into her face and saw what I had seen on another occasion when without knocking I had rushed into her room and found her in prayer. At last, she said, 'Nothing will happen to us, Howard. God will take care of us.'

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.plough.com/en/topics/faith/prayer/a-boy-and-a-comet#:~:text=It%20was%20the%20year%20of,of%20the%20awe%2Dinspiring%20spectacle.>

In that moment, something was touched and kindled in me, a quiet reassurance that has never quite deserted me. As I look back on it, what I sensed then was the fact that what stirred in me was one with what created and controlled the comet. It was this inarticulate awareness that silenced my fear and stilled my panic."<sup>3</sup>

All shall be well.

Revelation is a book of assurance, of reassurance, a vision of hope for those who are suffering, who are fearful for their place in the world and feel like the world is falling down around them and upon them. It's for those who are asking: what will happen to us? Right from the opening, "Grace and peace to you." Jesus Christ is the subject of this vision; our eyes turn to him. And right from the beginning, in Revelation 1:5, we see Christ before us, Christ, faithful witness, firstborn from the dead, ruler of the kings of earth.

He is the faithful witness. To be faithful is to continue on when things are hard, to be unwavering and to stay with it. Jesus did this; he was faithful. Even in front of Pontius Pilate, who had the power to condemn him, Jesus did not waver to try to save his life; he was faithful to God and God's purposes in the earth. As the son of God, he bore witness to the Father's will for all creation. As the incarnate one, Jesus was witness to the suffering of God's people. He saw God, and he saw man. Even more, he was fully God; he was fully human. He bore witness not just by what he saw, but by who he was. Witness in the biblical Greek is *martyr*, from which we get our word *martyr*. A witness is one who lays down his or her life. Jesus was faithful to death, even death on a cross. We have hope in Jesus, who was true even to his own suffering and crucifixion.

And Jesus is firstborn from the dead. He was resurrected from the dead, overcoming the power of the cross and the tomb. And so we have hope because though Jesus died, yet he lives. His resurrection bears witness to the power that is within him to overcome the final enemy. We have hope in him in this life, but not this life only, but also in the resurrection to come. All shall be made new. There is nothing that separates us from God in Christ Jesus. We have hope in him because in him, life overcomes the force of empire, injustice, the cross, and death.

The one who overcomes is the ruler of the kings of earth. Surely this was a title bestowed upon the Caesar of Rome, whose rulership ruled the other rulers. But Jesus' rule is even greater and entirely other. He said to Pilate, "My kingdom is not of this world," not meaning that it's in heaven alone but that it's not the way of the world's power. The way of Jesus is God's alternative to the ways of the world. His is a new way of being in the world, a new center of power. His is the power and glory, the way, the truth, and the life. He is the faithful witness, the firstborn of the resurrection, and the king of kings.

Much of the rest of Revelation is a harrowing apocalyptic journey through the suffering of a people on the verge of being lost but are assured they are not; it is a story of a world plunged into the kind of darkness you can only imagine if you've tasted some of it. But God

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.anamchara.com/mystics-and-institutional-religion-a-word-from-howard-thurman/>

is victorious in the end, a new heaven and a new earth, and God is in the midst of it. All that follows in Revelation begins here in the one who died, who rose, and who reigns now. The world as we know it and as we experience is not yet in full subjection to him, but we get a glimpse of Jesus's goodness and his glory. Even such a glimpse can be enough to sustain God's people through the darkest of nights.

And what is more, he loves us. These are the very next words in Revelation 1. He is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, the king of kings, and he loves us. His kingdom is a reign of love, costly, painful love, just the sort that kept him faithful to the cross, to friend, and enemy, and to all of us. It is a love that flows through us now and sets us free to follow him and know him and believe in him, assured that no matter what evidence stacks up to the contrary, he's got this. And in the end, will prevail, that in him all shall be made well.

Until that day, we are the people who hold hope. We hold, and we live hope in the one who died, who rose, and who reigns, and who is with us even now and to the end of the age.

We are the hope-bearers in these days and all the days to come. Amen.

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