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## **The Arc of Life**

### **Revelation 1:8**

According to science, some 13.7 billion years ago time began with a big bang, or more accurately, with a sudden dramatic expansion. Matter and subsequently light were strewn across the universe and due to gravity and have been organizing themselves ever since. Eventually our earth and solar system were formed. About 4 billion years ago, the miracle of life occurred and about 4 million years ago, humanity as we know it came into being.

According to Genesis Chapter 1, in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth; the earth was a formless void. And then God said, "Let there be light." Eventually the oceans and land are formed, and then sea animals and land animals are created. Creation culminates with the arrival of humanity – created in the image of God.

According to the Gospel of John, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." And "All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What came into being in him was life and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it."

According to the Revelation to John, The Lord God is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. In this highly symbolic and I'd say often misrepresented book, one thing is clear – God is at the end of all things, calling creation to its fulfillment and redemption through him. "Death will be no more" and "all things will be made new."

Yet there is a lot that will go on between the beginning and the end, between the God who brought us into being and the God who will lead us home. And thus there is God with us, Emmanuel. You may not be aware of it, but today is the last Sunday of the liturgical or church year. Advent, the coming of Christ, will mark its beginning. From Advent through Easter it will follow the life of Christ. And then from the resurrection of Christ until this time again next year, it will follow the life of the church. If you look closely, your Sunday School lessons may reflect this to some degree. Certain Sunday School classes are exempted from this of course. So we are at a time of ending and beginning, and beginnings and endings are important.

Looking in the Gospels there are stories about the birth of Christ and also about the final few years of his life – his ministry, teachings, death, and resurrection. In between this time there is only one story of Jesus at age 12. Found in Luke's gospel it tells about Jesus staying behind in the temple while both his parents are returning home from Jerusalem. Upon finding him his mother asked him, "Why have you treated us like this? Look your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety." He said them, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" Though the text points out that Mary treasured all these things in her heart, one wonders if Jesus had heeded their advice if he would not have gone on to become one of the better carpenters in Nazereth. Who knows, maybe he was. All we are told though is that increased in wisdom and in years until the time of his ministry.

Several years ago I talked about a book entitled Life – The Movie. It talked about how we can now create illusions so real we can almost live in them. And we can increasingly live in these illusions while decreasing meaningful interaction with other people. We can foster our desire for adventure and bravery, and perhaps also violence, through video games. And we can feel like we've experienced an epic struggle through watching a dramatic movie. Recently, as I was doing research for this sermon, I came across spiritual writer Donald Miller's new book A Million Miles in a Thousand Years. And in it he looks at what it would be like to make a movie of your life. I love his preface.

“If you watched a movie about a guy who wanted a Volvo and worked for years to get it, you wouldn't cry at the end when he drove off the lot, testing the windshield wipers. You wouldn't tell your friends you saw a beautiful movie or go home and put a record on to think about the story you'd seen. The truth is, you wouldn't remember that movie a week later, except you'd feel robbed and want your money back. Nobody cries at the end of a movie about a guy who wants a Volvo. But we spend years actually living those stories, and expect our lives to feel meaningful. The truth is, if what we chose to do with our lives won't make a story meaningful, it won't make a life meaningful either.”

So in the book Don talks about the meaningful components of a movie or story and tries to apply them to make a meaningful life. For a story to be interesting it has to be going somewhere. Yet whether it is interesting or not, people can't live without a story, without a role to play. And good or bad, they will choose the best story that they feel is available to them. And nobody remembers an easy story, but we spend most of our life seeking ease and comfort. And if we have them (ease & comfort), we are reluctant to change. We are also reluctant to move away from the security of the familiar, whether the familiar is good or bad. At least we know what to expect. But what makes a great story is a character facing his/her greatest fears with courage. And generally speaking, the character is reluctant to face whatever it is that they have to face. But until they face it, they won't change. And until they change, no meaningful story has occurred.

One of the subplots of the book was Don's relationship, or lack thereof, with his father. His parents had split up when he was young. His father moved away and Don hadn't seen his father in the last thirty years. One day, while driving, he was listening to NPR to story about a guy who reunited with his father after twenty years. Don pulled to the side of the road, and the Voice, as he called it, told him that he needed to see his father. He needed to see his father and forgive him for not being there. But he didn't want to. The Voice then asked him if he could write a better story, and so Don half-heartedly began pursuing his father. Don got all the information he could from his mother and eventually had a search agent try to find him. The word he got back was that his father had died five years earlier. Don was both relieved that he didn't have to face his dad and yet also grieved that he would never really know him. He could also tell himself that at least he had done what he could do. Because Don and his mother never really talked about him he didn't know what to tell her. But as it turned out the information Don got from the search agent was wrong. His mother had later found his father's phone number, called his father, and now told Don that his father was open to meeting him. Don held on to his father's phone number for over a month. Finally, needing to commit himself, he texted his friends that he was going to call his dad. When he did, Don was relieved to get his dad's voicemail. And he didn't pickup when his dad returned his call, but eventually found himself at his father's front door. So they visited and Don noticed that his father had purchased one of his books. After talking for two hours his father got to what he wanted to say. Finally, with tears in his eyes, Don's dad said to him, “I don't have any excuses son, I'm sorry. Do you forgive me?” “I do,” Don said. “I forgive you.” Don's father put his hand on his knee and said, “Don, you can write. I can't believe how good your

stories are.” Don didn’t want those words to mean so much, but they did. Don didn’t want to treasure his father’s affirmation, but he did.

One of the most profound statements of faith that a Christian can make is that God is Christ-like; not all-powerful, not all-knowing, but Christ-like. Because, if God truly is revealed in Christ then God feels with us, weeps for us, rejoices with us, and suffers for us. And, in looking at the beginning and ending of Christ’s life, this also means that God is vulnerable. As a baby, Jesus had to be taken to Egypt to avoid King Herod’s attempts to kill him. And at the end of his life Jesus is crucified and ridiculed on a cross. Likewise, for us, it is when we are most vulnerable that we are the most open to God.

When I was growing up, my family would go to see my dad’s parents in Edenton two or three times a year. They were getting up in age and my grandfather had actually suffered a terrible stroke before I was even born. His wife had cared for him for years and was sometimes the recipient of the brunt of his frustration of his limited physical capacities. Then in 1980 he suffered a second stroke and shortly thereafter had to be moved to a care facility. But a curious thing began to happen. He now began to mellow and though he could occasionally still be cantankerous, it was not his normal demeanor. As a teen, when we would arrive into town, my parents would drop me off to visit with him while they went to pick up Grandma. And though his speech was slurred and he was difficult to understand, he just had a gentle peace about him that made him comfortable to be around. It was OK if I didn’t understand something he said. And when there was silence, it didn’t feel uncomfortable. This was good because as a teen I didn’t always know what to say and he wasn’t able to say too much. He usually just spoke in phrases. Yet he still had a quick wit about him. One time a big white truck pulled up outside his window. As it pulled up I asked, “Is that the garbage truck?” Granddaddy Gray just looked. I walked over to the window and read the words on the side of the truck – “Food Service Delivery.” To which he replied, “No, it’s the garbage truck. You had it right the first time.” But the words I remember most are the ones he ended our conversations with – “You be good boy, be good.” He knew his health was failing and he knew each time he spoke with me, it might be his last. And of course, one time it was. But in those few succinct words, “You be good boy, be good,” each time I saw him he said goodbye to me in a way that acknowledged that it might be our last, and gave me his blessing and encouragement.

He gave me a gift that still affects me as a person here today. It showed me what was important to him at the end of his life. And his words to me were simply a reflection of who he had become as a person. He won all sorts of prizes playing bingo; he would give them away. You were hard-pressed to give him a gift that he wouldn’t give away. He always felt that someone else could use it more. If you asked him about it, he’d say, “I’m back where I started. I’ve got nothing.” But what he did have was peace with life, peace with the limitations of his life, peace with death, and peace with God. He had peace and an appreciation for people. That eludes many people.

It is also true that his stroke and aging affected his outlook on life. The stroke was a doorway through which he couldn’t return. Life’s circumstances forced him to change. At first it made him bitter. But once he accepted it, it made him a better person. Physically curable diseases are cured by doctors, but incurable diseases can only be cured by God.

If we look at life from a spiritual perspective, we come into this world with nothing, and we leave here with nothing. The only difference in us is the change wrought in our souls by life’s experiences. And death reminds us that there is finality to our story. So whatever good we will do, we only have a finite amount of time to do it. And yet while it lasts, life is ongoing. There will never be a moment, and event, a victory achieved in which everything on the other side of it will be easy. There will never be a

thing, and event, or a person that will solve all the challenges of life for you or for me. We are challenged to grow. But there are moments, achievements, and people who inspire us and help us along the way. And we need them. They remind us of the beauty of life – a beauty enjoyed all the more when we give of ourselves to bring a good thing into being. We are really more defined by what we give ourselves to than what we obtain or even achieve.

In our text this morning, Jesus Christ is referred to as “the faithful witness.” But the Greek word translated witness also means martyr. And here martyr might be more appropriate, as he is also called “the firstborn of the dead.” John has the vision and writes the book of Revelation while enduring Roman exile on the island of Patmos. The Revelation is written against the backdrop of Roman persecution of Christianity. John knows that there will be more who will die for their faith at the hands of the Romans; Christ is only “the firstborn of the dead.” And he encourages his fellow believers to be faithful even as their Lord, the Christ was, because God has the final say. And yet, as Jesus says to Pilate, “My Kingdom is not of this world.” The power of Christ is that his love for humanity and his testimony of truth could not be turned aside by the threat of violence. No matter what happened, the love, and life, and truth within him could not be destroyed. He could not be made to fear doing good. He could not be made to hate or warp his soul in response to what he endured. I like the following words by William Sloane Coffin about Jesus. “Deserted by his disciples, in agony on the cross, barely thirty years old, Christ said, ‘It is finished.’ And thus ended the most complete life ever lived.”

I doubt any of us will face martyrdom like Jesus or the early Christians did, or even Christians in some places the world today. But you know what? Life is still often hard for many of us, perhaps all of us. So when we come together as a community of faith, let us be good companions to one another. Let us help to make each other’s journey a little easier; because when we do that, all of our lives are a little more meaningful.

While we are called to truly live in this life, I want to close by making a few remarks about the next one. I will always remember 5 or 6 years ago when LA Hutson shared his near-death experience with the youth. Upon his reviving, he told the doctors what time it was when he clinically died, because at that time he was out of his body and could see the clock on the wall. And I remember him saying, “I’ll never fear death again.” There are some who would say that an afterlife is just wishful thinking. “It’s just something you want, so you believe that it’s true.” And in truth, I think it is something that we generally want. But you know what, if you look at the birth of universe from a strictly scientific point of view, it would have been wishful thinking that we would be here today – but here we are. And why is there something rather than nothing at all? All we can do is to trust that the same God who gave us this life will lead us into the next. If we have trusted God with our living, then we can trust him with our dying. Even though we may not know exactly what lies beyond the grave we do know who lies beyond the grave – the same God who brought this universe into being. Before every birth and after every death, there is still God. Let us live our lives in relationship to him.