

Revelation 22:12-21
May 16, 2010

South Plains

The One We're Waiting For

In the tenth grade I took Latin. There is one word I remember above all from that class. It's an English word that the teacher used to point to the accented syllable when she taught us to speak in Latin. And, of course, it has a Latin root. The word is "penultimate," which literally means next to last or almost last. I thought of "penultimate" this past week because Kirk Hall has been a penultimate project from the very beginning. So many times, we have reached what we thought was the "next to last thing" before breaking ground for construction. Our plans got delayed enough times until I decided months ago to stop making any predictions. Finally, we have set a date for the ceremonial ground breaking. Clean your shovels, paint them the colors of the rainbow and bring them to church at 10 AM, Sunday, June 6. It will be a great day.

But please don't expect ground breaking for Kirk Hall to be the ultimate experience in the life of this congregation. The truth is that life is one penultimate experience after another. That's not bad news for South Plains or for you and me. If life were a series of ultimate experiences – the best meal, the best kiss, the best sermon, and the best sunset – all those superlatives would get pretty boring. We seem to be wired to look forward, to want more; or in Christian terms, we're wired

to hope. Hoping is what empowers us to transcend our present situation and imagine a better future. And, hopeful imagination plants the seeds of tomorrow. Kirk Hall is the next step toward a better tomorrow.

That's the only way I can understand this last chapter in the book of Revelation. The vision of this last book in the Bible concludes with a promise as Jesus says, "See, I am coming soon; my reward is with me, to repay according to everyone's work (22:12)." That promise has been repeated a number of times in Revelation. In fact, the promise of Jesus' immediate return is prominent in the New Testament. However, the fact is that Jesus did not return quickly, at least not in the way his disciples expected. They seem to have expected the clouds to part and Jesus to descend to earth in all his glory. It did not happen. That leaves us with two options. We can simply decide that Jesus and the New Testament got it wrong. Or, we can decide that this promise needs to be interpreted in a different way.

There are endless variations on that second option. One of the consistent themes is that waiting is part of the human condition. We are always waiting, not only for the light to change or for our ship to come in; we are always waiting for the ultimate. In the language of faith, the ultimate event is the coming of Jesus Christ who brings the new heaven and new earth, the kingdom of God, eternal life in all its fullness and joy. We believe that promise because we trust God, and because God keeps providing these penultimate blessings that point to

the ultimate. The best meal leaves us anticipating a better banquet, a banquet scripture calls the marriage feast of the Lamb. The best kiss leaves us in a little while wanting another kiss, the kiss of peace. The best sunset in this world foreshadows the dawn of another world. The best sermon..., well that may be only the preview for the benediction. When Jesus says, "I am coming soon," I believe that means we can look for him in every penultimate blessing. I believe he is coming in a small, but important way in the construction of Kirk Hall.

When we have a first class kitchen to prepare food and a room where the whole congregation can sit down together for fellowship that will be very close to heaven. When we have adequate space for arm babies and toddlers and children and youth, we will enjoy a blessing we have dreamed about for generations. When we can shorten the walk to the bathrooms, we will rejoice indeed. But, we will want to remember that Kirk Hall is only the penultimate goal of the church. It's not the ultimate!

Too often a comfortable church has made comfort its top priority. Too often paying off a mortgage becomes an end in itself instead of a means for ministry. The book of Revelation reminds us over and over that there's more. God has more in mind for the people of God than persecution and more than prosperity. The closing verses reiterate that those who made sacrifices for their faith will be rewarded. And, enemies of the kingdom will be punished. But, in the end, God is all in all, the Alpha

and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.

When I say that Kirk Hall is only a penultimate blessing, please don't think I want to dull the shine and sparkle from this dream that is coming true. Kirk Hall will make telling the good news easier. Many of you have told me about friends who drive by South Plains regularly and say to themselves, "What a quaint bit of history. I wonder if anyone uses that church for funerals any more." Kirk Hall will make a statement that this Presbyterian Church is in business. God is alive and well on this corner. It will make possible a deeper ministry to families, retirees, singles, and all sorts of people. It will provide a base for showing poor families the love of Christ in very concrete ways.

Of course the building itself will do none of these things because the building is not the church. The church is you and I going about the life of love in Christ: Telling the gospel of God's desire to give us abundant life;
Demonstrating forgiveness in our relationships;
Making redemption real by helping people put their lives back together after loss;
Becoming friends;
And living in the hope of the ultimate blessing when Christ brings the kingdom of God on earth in all its fullness.

Our ministry as a church becomes more than the activities of another club because we hold on to our hope in the ultimate fulfillment of life in Christ. The Bible and the book of Revelation in particular have lots of ways of talking about ultimate fulfillment. It's heaven, or a kingdom where God alone is the ruler, or the new Jerusalem, or a courtroom where God is judge of our history, or a great banquet where people come from east and west and north and south to sit at table. Then there is the metaphor of marriage.

In the marriage metaphor, the banquet is a wedding feast. The bridegroom is Christ and the bride is the church. The wedding is when the church is united or re-united with Jesus Christ at the end of time. It's a joyous moment, a moment beyond time when grudges and misunderstandings and wounds are put aside forever.

One of the blessings of South Plains is this sanctuary. It is so charming that several couples have come to us asking to be married here simply because it is a sanctuary that evokes the holy. The Scots would say it is a thin place where the barriers between heaven and earth almost disappear. I've been privileged to officiate at the marriage of several couples who have no other association with South Plains. I tell them we need to have some premarital conversations, and they readily agree.

But, there is often an awkward moment in those conversations when we talk about family members coming to the wedding. Someone on the invitation list is estranged, or divorced, or unhappy about the marriage, or has a reputation for acting inappropriately on these occasions. It's a delicate matter for the bride and groom. What never fails to impress me is the lengths to which the couple is willing to go in order to include everyone in the celebration. And, indeed, 99% of the time the wedding becomes a time of healing. The estranged party attends after all. The black sheep behaves. Congratulations and hugs begin to a small repair in damaged relationships. Weddings are significant occasions in a family. We might think of them as penultimate celebrations.

Weddings on earth foreshadow the final celebration in the family of God. The wedding banquet that pictures heaven is a grand reunion. Invitations go out to everyone. There's a wee bit of tension as we wonder who will accept the invitation and how we will all behave together. But, the tension is overshadowed by the anticipation of the bride and groom. It's the ultimate social event for God who is inherently social: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Revelation 21:17 captures the tone:
The Spirit and the bride say, "Come."
And let everyone who hears say, "Come."
And let everyone who is thirsty come.

Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift.

Our groundbreaking will be a wonderful day in the life of South Plains. The completion of Kirk Hall will be an incredible blessing not only to us, but to our community as well. It is a penultimate moment in the life of this congregation, one we will long remember because the effects will last a long time. I don't expect it to usher in the kingdom, but who knows? "The one testified to these things says, "Surely I am coming soon."

And, the church reading the Revelation responds, "Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!"