

THE ALPHA AND OMEGA VARIANT

Sermon, January 2, 2022

Epiphany of the Lord

Texts: Revelation 1:4-8, 21:5-7, 22:12-17

As many of you know, the WHO ... not the popular rock band from the sixties and seventies, but the **World Health Organization** ... decided Coronavirus variants are to be named after letters of the Greek alphabet instead of their place of first discovery, in a move to avoid "xenophobic stigma" and/or "causing offense to any cultural, social, national, regional, professional or ethnic groups." So rather than naming variants after the places of their discovery, a letter from the Greek alphabet was assigned. Variants of Concern of Covid-19 to date: **Alpha**, first seen in the United Kingdom, and designated Alpha on Dec. 18, 2020. **Beta**, first seen in South Africa, and designated as Beta also on Dec. 18, 2020 (just a brief aside: South Africa is far advanced in genomic technology; a variant didn't necessarily develop in SA, but was discovered there). **Gamma**, first seen in Brazil, and designated Jan. 11, 2021. **Delta**, first seen in India, and designated as such May 11, 2021. Two "Variants of Interest" (which is one level below "variants of concern"): **Lambda**, first seen in Peru and designated on June 4, 2020. The next Greek letter and designation, **Mu**, was first seen in Colombia (and not on a cow), and designated Mu on Aug. 30, 2021. The next two letters in the Greek alphabet were skipped: "Nu" because is too easily phonetically confounded/confused with "new;" the WHO thought a "new Nu variant" would be confusing. And 'Xi' was not used because it's phonetic spelling is a very common last name in China, including that of the Chinese premier, so the WHO thought it be best to avoid any potential "xenophobic stigma" by an unintended association of the variant with China. So the next Greek letter was assigned to the newest variant, Omicron, seen in many countries and designated Omicron as a variant of concern December 1, 2021. To be clear, that's omicron, not omNlcron, as it is commonly mispronounced. OmNlcron is a creature from the popular Transformers science fiction series, Omicron is the Greek letter. It is an understandable mistake, because the prefix Omni means all, everywhere, in all ways and places ... as in omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient. And Omicron certainly seems to be Omni-present these days. My guess is that if another variant is discovered, they're probably going to skip the next letter in the Greek alphabet that comes after Omicron, which is Pi ... if they name it Pi, then everybody might want some of that ... yum!

Ever since the WHO started this labeling, I began thinking ... this will preach! Hence the sermon title: *The Alpha and Omega Variant*. This is the variant we want to catch! This variant tends to spread and grow and infect when people gather together in the name of the one Who IS the Alpha and Omega. "Wherever two or three or more gather in His name, He is there among them." This variant is not a cause for fear, but conversely, it'll cast out fear ... "perfect love casts out fear" (1 John 4:18). As I've mentioned before, the most frequent command in the Bible is "Fear not," The Christian faith does not say, "Fear not, trust in God and He will see that none of the things you fear will happen to you." No, the Christian faith says, "You just may find that the things people fear are quite likely to happen to you, but ... they are nothing to be afraid of. Rather, fear God and find your joy in serving him." Or, in the words of the benediction I've used before, the source of which is unknown: "May you love God so much, that you love nothing else too much. May you fear God so much, that you fear nothing else at all."

This variant wants to infect you, in a good way. C.S. Lewis, in **Mere Christianity**, likened the process of Christian growth and sanctification to an *infection* taking over our minds, hearts and souls. Lewis calls it God's *good* infection; we "catch" this Alpha and Omega variant, and we start to show symptoms, good symptoms, symptoms like growing and contagious patience and kindness and graciousness and love ... it is an infectious holiness, from the presence of the Alpha and Omega Himself. The more we find ourselves infected with this variant, the more we find ourselves responding, behaving, and thinking in ways that display this *good infection* of our spirit ... and part of our calling as a church is not to shut ourselves in isolation from the world to somehow protect the world from this variant, but to go into the world as His *infectious* representatives and make disciples of all nations, lovingly spreading the Alpha and Omega variant, the good "disease" of sanctifying holiness, wherever we go! This variant will also build up all kinds of good immunities in your spirit, helping to make you immune from fear, immune from despair, immune from loneliness (for He will never leave or forsake you), immune from purposelessness, immune from the ravages of sin. The Alpha and Omega variant ... catch it! And spread it to as many people as possible.

From our Call to Worship: "Grace and peace to you from Him Who is, and Who was, and Who is to come, and from the seven spirits before His throne, and from Jesus Christ, Who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. 'I am the Alpha and the Omega,' says the Lord God, 'Who is, and Who was, and Who is to come, the Almighty.'" John refers to Jesus as the "firstborn" of the dead. Does this mean He was the first to be raised from the dead? No, there are at least eight accounts in Scripture of those being raised from death to life. However, each and every one of them has something in common ... they all died again. Jesus, though, is alive forever and ever! "I am the Alpha and the Omega, Who is, and Who was, and Who is to come, the Almighty."

As you know, the Greek alphabet begins with the letter Alpha, and ends with the letter Omega. **A Ω**

Look at the shape of the letter Omega. It looks a little like a horseshoe, doesn't it? My imagination may be running a bit much, but you know in cartoons those cartoon-prints of a horse's hooves remain on a door after a horse kicks it open? I can just imagine a big Omega-print on the inside of that garden tomb door as the Alpha and Omega booted it out of the way!

For the Time with the Children, I had planned to place this stack of thick commentaries before the kids and asked if any of them wanted to guess how many different letters were in this stack of books. The answer is easy, really. There are only 26, as there are only 26 letters in the English alphabet. Everything needed to put together the almost countless words of knowledge and research reflected in those books can be found in the 26 letters of the alphabet (*24 in the Greek alphabet*). And the analogy I was attempting to draw was that everything we need for Life itself can be found in the One who is the "A to Z", the Alpha and the Omega, to mix metaphors a bit, the One Who is the WORD of God incarnate. Listen to another passage, one usually read on Good Friday, not Epiphany: John 19:19: *Pilate had a notice prepared and fastened to the cross. It read: JESUS OF NAZARETH, THE KING OF THE JEWS. Many of the Jews read this sign, for the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city, and the sign was written in Aramaic, Latin and Greek. The chief priests of the Jews protested to Pilate, "Do not write 'The King of the Jews,' but that this man claimed to be king of the Jews." Pilate answered, "What I have written, I have written."* It was Pilate who insisted on the wording of this sign, and that it be written in three languages: Greek, Latin and Aramaic (*a dialect of ancient Hebrew*). Why did Pilate use these three languages? The obvious reason is that in that time and location, these were three primary languages used. But there may be more to it than that. Some believe Pilate, wittingly or unwittingly, was making an inspired statement of faith for all the world to see. You see, **Greek** was known as the language of philosophy, education and learning; **Latin** was known as the language of power and authority, the language of the mighty Roman Empire; **Hebrew** was known as the language of religion and divine revelation. The great Puritan scholar Matthew Henry offers a unique insight into what Pilate wittingly or unwittingly may have been inspired to communicate: *"In each of these languages, Christ is proclaimed King, in Whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom (Greek), authority (Latin) and revelation (Hebrew)."* Because in Jesus Christ, the Alpha and the Omega, we do find it all ... all wisdom, all authority, and all the revelation and blessings of God. And the message of Epiphany is that this Variant is for the whole world.

Epiphany, the twelfth day of Christmas (*as our Director of Music wrote in an email shared earlier*) is a celebration once held with more festivity than December 25. I am told that Epiphany is still celebrated in the Eastern Orthodox tradition with more vigor than Christmas itself; Epiphany signifies that day when the non-Jewish world became part of the Christmas story. In a way, THIS is our holiday! This is where the Christmas story includes us, the Gentile world (*edited out due to time -- I had a colleague who told me he would love to get churches back to the historical commemoration of a twelve day Christmas season that only BEGINS on December 25. Christmas is a momentous event worth savoring and celebrating for days! He would also recommend Christians could save money and exercise better financial stewardship by taking advantage of the post-Christmas sales, buy your presents after December 25, exchange gifts on Epiphany, and donate the money you'd save to the mission of the church! It'll probably never catch on, but it is a great idea!*) Epiphany is the day we commemorate the revealing of the Messiah to the Gentile world in the arrival of the wise men from the East who followed a star to find a king in the most unlikely of circumstances. They persisted in following the star until they found THE Star, and when they found the true Star of the show they bowed down, worshipped and offered their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Something I've asked the children a few times over the years during the Christmas Eve services, *"Where was the brightest star that first Christmas Eve?"* Hands would shoot up and everyone thought they had the obviously right answer. However, the brightest star that night was not in the sky over Bethlehem; the brightest Star of the show was lying in the manger. The Bible speaks about a Star who will come forth out of Jacob, one who will be known as the Morning Star, the Dayspring ... the latter two terms used to denote the rising of the sun in the morning, dispelling the darkness of night. The prophet Malachi also refers to this star as the Sun of Righteousness rising with healing in His wings, as we sing in the second stanza of "Hark! the Herald Angels Sing" -- *"Hail the heaven born Prince of Peace, Hail the Sun of Righteousness. Light and life to all He brings, risen with healing in His wings."* This Star is the Messiah, the One who will come and dispel the darkness of sin as the sun dispels the darkness of night. This Star is the Light of the World. And this is all affirmed by Jesus Himself in Revelation 22:16, where we read: *"I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end. I, Jesus, have sent My angel to give you this testimony for the churches. I am the Root and the Offspring of David, and the bright Morning Star."* The Alpha and Omega, the Star of this show, the One who will bring light and life into our world and to our souls.

That star over Bethlehem had a secondary function, a God-appointed duty ... its purpose was to direct others to the true Star of the show, the Morning Star, the Sun of Righteousness, the Alpha and the Omega variant. As I would tell the children those Christmas Eves past, God calls all of us to be stars like that star over Bethlehem. That's our role, our duty. By our deeds, by our words, by our lives, by all that we do ... we are to light the way and direct others to the true Star, the Light of the world, infecting them with the Alpha and Omega variant.

"To Him Who loves us and freed us from our sins by His blood, and made us to be a kingdom and priests serving His God and Father, to Him, the Alpha and the Omega, be glory and power forever and ever." Amen.