

Heaven's Great Community

By
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from the pulpit of
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church

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All Saints Sunday

Psalm 34:1-10, 22

¹I will bless the LORD at all times; his praise shall continually be in my mouth. ²My soul makes its boast in the LORD; let the humble hear and be glad. ³O magnify the LORD with me, and let us exalt his name together. ⁴I sought the LORD, and he answered me, and delivered me from all my fears. ⁵Look to him, and be radiant; so your faces shall never be ashamed. ⁶This poor soul cried, and was heard by the LORD, and was saved from every trouble. ⁷The angel of the LORD encamps around those who fear him, and delivers them. ⁸O taste and see that the LORD is good; happy are those who take refuge in him. ⁹O fear the LORD, you his holy ones, for those who fear him have no want. ¹⁰The young lions suffer want and hunger, but those who seek the LORD lack no good thing. ²²The LORD redeems the life of his servants; none of those who take refuge in him will be condemned.

Revelation 7:9-17

⁹After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. ¹⁰They cried out in a loud voice, saying, “Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!” ¹¹And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, ¹²singing, “Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.” ¹³Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, “Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?” ¹⁴I said to him, “Sir, you are the one that knows.” Then he said to me, “These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. ¹⁵For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them. ¹⁶They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; ¹⁷for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

It seems like a dream, this vision of heaven from Revelation to John. It is reminiscent of what J. R. R. Tolkien might have had in mind when he wrote of “Joy, Joy beyond the walls of this world.” It is as if the angel pulled back the veil and gave John a glimpse of heaven’s final victory. He saw a multitude, too many to number. Heaven’s great community is also diverse, made up of people from every nation under heaven, every race, tribe, class and language. They are clean, fresh and standing before the Lamb that has taken away the sins of the world. They sing: Salvation belongs to our God who sits upon the throne. And their songs are answered by heaven’s choir singing: *Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving... be to our God forever.*

We obviously cannot explain the intricacies of heaven, any more than Jesus described the architecture of the many mansions he promised he was going to prepare for the disciples.¹ However, we are given this vision, from a follower of the Risen Christ, inspired by his experience of God, and found revelatory by the early church to be preserved in Holy Scripture. What this vision promises is the restoration of community... the best of what we enjoy in this life on earth is God’s gift of community among family and friends, the assurance that we are never alone. Heaven preserves that great community but there’s a difference. Suffering, pain, tears and the fear of death will be no more.

Biblical scholars warn readers of apocalyptic visions to enter into them without trying to decode every detail. Like good poetry, these visions are meant to be evocative instead of explanatory. They are meant to tease our imaginations instead of giving us descriptive answers.² However, these visions are more than a dream of the “pie in the sky and the sweet bye and bye.”

This text recognizes the reality of human suffering. The saints gathered around the throne of God did not just fly on golden chariots into this heavenly realm; rather, these are the ones who have come through the great tribulation, the great ordeal. We know something of what that tribulation meant when John was banished to the island of Patmos where he wrote about this vision. It was a time of great violence, a time of persecution for Christian believers, a time when people were divided into distinct classes of human existence - by race and nationality, slavery, and freedom, the oppressed and the oppressor. It was a time not unlike our time.

The vision invites us to bring our trials and tribulations, our sadness and our grief over all lives lost, and to raise them into the glorious light of resurrection. The tragic end of life we see on the evening news and the losses we experience closer to home. For some – that passage into death - was a valiant struggle through cancer, or the intrepid advancement of age. For some it was a fierce battle with declining health, or a tragic struggle with mental health. For some – their tribulation was an untimely moment of facing death without readiness, or for others a gradual

¹ John 14.

² Christopher Rowland, “The Book of Revelation,” *New Interpreters Bible*, vol. XII, p. 508.

slide into a peace that surpasses our understanding. The particular names of the saints we recall today also bring to mind the unnamed family and friends we carry in our hearts and minds.

And if we broaden the scope beyond our known losses to remember all the saints - taken by the ravages of war, by fires and floods, by gun violence, by tragic means of whatever kind, we get even closer to the vision God holds before us. Through whatever tribulation, - we are told - all are washed in *the blood of the Lamb*.

Now, if that kind of language makes you squirm a bit, just remember it's old poetry that points to the ineffable self-emptying love of God acted out upon the cross. It's the Bible's poetic reminder that we don't arrive in this glorious vision by ourselves. God takes us there through Jesus Christ who has gone through a great tribulation for us, bringing us along through God's forgiving mercy, grace, and love. Whatever else heaven might be, we are promised it is a great community restored and redeemed, made new and made whole. That vision empowers us in the land of the living to do the restorative, redemptive work of God here and now. It is the enactment of that community which is rehearsed every All Saints Sunday.

Tom Long writes of a memory which describes how the church enacts this vision of God's restoration and redemption. "When my grandmother died many years ago, her neighbors brought food in vast quantities to her home. The food was not placed on paper plates or in disposable dishes, but rather carried in on the very best China. On the bottom of each dish was a piece of adhesive tape with the name of the neighbor who brought the dish. What that meant, of course, was that in the days after the funeral, the platters had to be divided up among the family members and returned to their owners. An inconvenience, we might think today. But actually, no, it was not at all. What it meant was that members of the family were required to call on the neighbors, where invited in 'for a cup of coffee before you go' the grieving were summoned back to the land of the living." Long concludes, "There was wisdom in those pieces of adhesive tape with those names."³

That's what the church does best, particularly on All Saints Sunday. We summon the grieving back into community. We summon one another into a vision of life redeemed. We stand together before the throne of God. All of us – a great multitude – from every race and nation where God's children pass through tribulation to that heavenly realm where the Lamb who sits upon the throne brings salvation with a hand so tender as to dry the tears from our cheeks. In so doing, our sorrow is replaced with music of unutterable joy. And we pull back the veil in order to see together the great community we are meant to be; the great community we will surely be.

AMEN.

³ Tom Long, "The Ways of Death," *Journal for Preachers*.