

“Hope”

A Sermon Written by the Rev. Stephen R. Silver
for First Congregational Church of Lebanon
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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 might seem ominous that on the Sunday before this particular Election Day, our reading comes from the Book of Revelation. Armageddon! All that apocalyptic stuff that makes one shiver at the prospect of the end of the world. Really? After all we’ve been through this campaign cycle, it just seems too much.

Well, I have good news for you. This reading is not an endorsement of the *Left Behind* series of books. It has nothing to do with bloody depictions of the End Times. In fact, none of the Book of Revelation really does. As any responsible biblical scholar or preacher will tell you, this book is a poetic vision, a prophecy attesting to God’s power and faithfulness, not a prognostication of specific events to come. John of Patmos was not Nostradamus, and his writings were not meant to be a key to deciphering the future. Far from it.

Not that people weren’t and aren’t still tempted. Martin Luther felt this book should be dropped from the canon, in part because of the false messages people took from the text. As one modern commentary cheekily begins its section on this text, “Revelation is a

strange book, nearly as strange as some of its readers.” The message is clear, at least to me: we need to handle Revelation with kid gloves. *This book is trouble.*

In fact, the confusion around this last book in the Christian Bible is so great that people continue to erroneously call it the Book of *Revelations*, as if there were more than one. If you take away just one thing from the sermon today, let it be the book’s name. It is singular.

Now that we’ve gotten that out of the way, we can tackle today’s passage, see what it’s really about, and learn why this is the assigned lesson for All Saints’ Day.

As with the rest of Revelation, this passage is rich with strange and powerful imagery. It’s set amidst the unveiling of the seven seals; six have already been shown, and one more is left to be revealed. But before that happens, John tells us about a great multitude gathered in the heavenly throne room, ascribing salvation to God and to the lamb, who we can infer is Jesus. But that’s not what I find arresting about this passage. Instead, two other things should catch our attention.

The first is the size of this crowd. No numbers are offered here, but in prior verses we hear of 144,000 people, representing each of the tribes of Israel. Now, the throng has grown and is innumerable, with representatives of every race and people. While this text may not be universalist in its intent, it does align with the idea that God’s true followers will come from every nation, speak every tongue. Salvation is not restricted to one group of people but free to any and all who choose to follow Christ.

But following Christ is not easy and never has been. We’re reminded of this when we are told that the robes of the multitudes have been washed in the blood of the lamb. Clearly this refers to the blood of Christ, seen as the sacrifice by which our sins were expiated.

Now, we know that atonement theology is a matter of some debate in the contemporary Church. But I hope we can all agree that Jesus gave his all for us, and that his followers throughout the ages have given of themselves in following the Christ.

Remember the society in which those first Christians lived. The Roman Empire dominated the Mediterranean world, and its emperors claimed to be divine. While some like Vespasian on his death bed did so tongue-in-cheek, others were deluded enough to believe their own propaganda. That in turn created a dangerous climate for those who professed belief in one God alone, and during the first century, those beliefs could lead to scorn, to persecution, even to death.

The early Church remembered this, and that is why martyrs have always held a special place in the gathered community’s memory, which begs the question: Would you or I endure such pain for our faith? This is something we need to contemplate and pray on. Now, this is not a call to seek out martyrdom, but it is a hope that we acknowledge what our beliefs might demand of us.

During this election season, we have all been called to ask what our hopes and dreams are for our nation. Who among the candidates speaks to what Abraham Lincoln called “the better angels of our natures”? Remember, he used that phrase in his First Inaugural Address. The nation was already cleaved in two. It was not a moment for optimism.

Or was it? I believe that Lincoln, a realist if ever there was one, believed also in the vital importance of hope. Without it, the fight to save the Union was pointless, the great struggle to end slavery was meaningless, and the dream to fulfill the promises of the Declaration of Independence would be for naught.

Almost two millennia earlier, hope was also what drove John. He was all too familiar with the self-serving power of the Romans, the cost paid by the faithful to follow Jesus, and the dangers of complicity in the machinations of earthly leaders. He himself sat in exile on the island of Patmos, yet he dreamed of a glorious future in which all men and women of faith would be redeemed and set free to worship the Lord in the New Jerusalem. The hope of his faith overpowered the gloom of his situation.

John knew that the faithful had suffered, sometimes even sacrificing their very lives. Following Jesus was not easy then, nor is it easy today. Though we here in the United States need not fear persecution at the hands of the state, religious faith is challenged and questioned by the wider culture. We are often called on to accommodate our faith to secular propositions, to defer to political judgments of the left or the right. Staying true to our beliefs is not always easy, but if we are not careful, our efforts will devolve into a self-righteousness that ultimately glorifies only ourselves, rather than the brave stand for the good that God wants for his creation. Politicians throughout the world, not just those in the West, are accustomed to making promises, some of which beggar belief. In our own country candidates have vowed to put a chicken in every pot, to deliver a return to normalcy, to bring us to a new frontier, to tell us that “yes, we can,” and, most recently, to make America great again. We as Christians are called to judge these campaign promises against the real blessings of God. We read in today’s lesson that

¹⁶[The multitude] 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.

Here, we see more than bigger missiles or new roads, more than a national chauvinism or adherence to an ideology. Here is a hope in which the faithful will worship their God, who not only will feed them and succor them and protect them from harm but also will “wipe away every tear from their eyes.” Here we see a progression from a God who must shield himself from human view on Sinai lest Moses perish to one who will come down to us, and comfort each and every person.

Compare that vision of the true king with the inflated importance of a Caesar—or an American president.

Now, this isn't supposed to be an election sermon; you got one of those two weeks ago. This message is instead about All Saints' Day, which we observe on Sunday, a day when we remember those among the faithful who went before us. By tradition we call them saints. We know some of them did mighty deeds that are still remembered while others performed acts less noticed. But all did the work of God.

These women and men did so in the belief that the God who came to us in Jesus, who blessed us with the Holy Spirit, who will be with us in the New Jerusalem, was real—not a vague notion but the very One that made heaven and earth.

The hope expressed in today's passage is a messianic hope, of the long-promised future being made real. But here we see nothing of empires or kingdoms, of earthly riches or great princes enthroned. Nor do we see one nation, let alone our nation, exalted above any other. Instead, we see a mixed throng of humanity being cared for and healed by God.

This is a vision of God's future. In it there are no robots or flying cars, no gene therapy or supercomputers. That is the stuff of our dreams, and our creativity. God's plans, though, are different: they are about wholeness and salvation.

You may be wondering about the elders or the four creatures who are mentioned in the passage. Why have I not commented on them? Because in a way, they are but a distraction from what really matters. Why speculate about the appearance of heavenly creatures when we can be focused on the promises of God? Why talk about the layout of the heavenly city when we are called to bring the kingdom of God into being here on earth? Why talk about biblical trivia when we can focus on the life-giving word of God?

As we consider these questions, we recall Luther and his desire to dispense with Revelation. Who are we to let the Bible get in the way of the Word of God? But a counter question would be, why run when we are called to engage? Scripture is meant to be a support and a comfort; it was never promised that it would always be clear or self-evident. I believe that the early Church was right to retain this final book of the canon because it was so different, so strange, that we could not help but see God in its pages, if only we looked with eyes focused on his word and not our priorities.

The saints who went before us looked to God, as their inspiration, as their hope, as the purpose of their being.

And what of the sinners? There are so many ways for people to sin, against God and God's people. But our hope is that they—if we are honest, that *we*—will finally hear the divine word and turn back to the One who fashioned us in his image. We can look to today's lesson for a depiction of that hope realized, of the faithful united with God in heaven, however that may be defined.

When we think of the lamb and his sacrifice for us, we should not be so focused on the blood or the cross, but on what Jesus did for us in his life and death, the potential for new life that he made available to you and me.

Looking at this passage, we are reminded of how important symbols are in our faith. Some may be obscure—how many of us remember and can relate the symbols of the four Gospel writers? (Luke is represented by an ox, Mark a lion, Matthew a man with an axe, and John an eagle.) Other times they are crystal clear—we all know about the cross.

But clarity of meaning does not translate into ubiquity of use. Think of how the fish has paled in comparison with the cross over two millennia. Yet we lose something when all we focus on is the cross of the crucifixion holding a bloody Christ or the cross triumphant with its message of Christ resurrected. We should not set those images aside, but we should also not see them to the exclusion of all else. The fish is a reminder that Jesus called on Peter, and by extension you and me, to be fishers of people or evangelists, to share the good news of God's redeeming love with all the world. We are saved, but we are also called to share the word of salvation with others.

In short, there is still much work for us to do. This day let us treasure the memory of those saints who have gone before us, who have persevered, who have given their full measure, who have walked among us in this place or others where we have lived. But let us also remember that this day is not just about the past but the present and the future. Let us remember that there is still room for more saints to be received—that there is still room for you and me in the New Jerusalem.