

November 1, 2020

Revelation 7: 9-17

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“Everyone Is In the Picture”

A year ago we would never have imagined that our worship ministry would be labeled either “in-person” or “online.” It’s probably true that over time we’ve taken the privilege of being together in worship for granted. Now, in this pandemically challenged world, we continue to make a commitment to provide quality online worship videos each week, as well as observing safety protocols that allow us to gather in-person to worship and praise God. This is our new normal. It may not be a surprise to learn that among clergy circles and in the conversations of church leaders everywhere is the anxious worry about the long term impact of all of this. When it’s possible for everyone to return to the building, will folks come back? Attendance in worship has always been an important indicator of the vitality of a congregation. Many are worried that Christianity, as we’ve always known it, may be significantly harmed by the hardships we are enduring. The bible speaks so clearly to our anxiety and our worry. We might even say the holy book should be our “go to” resource when we are threatened in the present or uncertain about the future. From the words of beloved psalm 23, “even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will not fear,” to Jesus’ promise in the gospel, “I am with you always, even to the end of the age,” to the words of our reading from the Book of Revelation today, “God will wipe every tear,” there is no present reality and no struggle in the future that will ever separate us from the “love of God in Christ Jesus.” I call to mind another writing of the early church which says, “Perfect love casts out fear.” (1 John 4:18) God’s love for us is perfection and our fear has no chance when confronted by the truth of our faith.

We may not think of the Book of Revelation as a source of hope but I’m here to challenge that assumption today. Yes, Revelation is full of creatures and beasts and the description of spiritual battles, but the intent is not to scare us, despite what Hollywood and the movie industry has done with this unique book of the bible. The Book of Revelation points to our greatest fears not to bring us down but to show us how God’s power and presence in the face of our fear brings triumph and life. The writing captures the vision of John, an early believer and follower of Jesus, who was thrown into prison on the Island of Patmos by the Roman Empire. His crime was his allegiance to Christ. We believe John died in prison around the year 100 C.E., but his vision lives on and, just like today, what he saw through eyes of faith helps us to see how God’s victory is given to us, even when all seems to be lost.

We know things are tough in our world at this present time, but what we are going through is nothing when compared to what John and the early Christians were going through. In the first and second centuries, Rome was persecuting those who were loyal to Christ because that loyalty threatened the authority of the Emperor. How mistaken Rome was in thinking it could silence John’s witness by locking him up in solitary confinement. Chained in his cell, John saw the future God was creating for him and for all who would one day stand in the presence of the Lord. John saw a multitude, more than can ever be counted, robed in white, worshipping God, waving their hands and singing praise and thanksgiving, confident that every need would be met and every tear would be dried. No pandemic can take away our worship. No weakness in our bodies can cancel what God gives to us. No threat, not even death, can prevent us from standing on the solid ground of our faith. Whether we worship in-person, online, in this world or in the world to come, we are together today because the love of Christ does not let us go.

We worship celebrating with all the saints today. It’s said that every time we gather for worship it is like a mini Easter morning. This is particularly true on All Saints’ Day. We know with great certainty that resurrection isn’t something God gave just to Jesus. We are all raised up to be with God and Christ, in the place where the light shines and where our worship of God is forever. In a few moments we will name those of our congregation we have lost to death in the past year. It is also a time to name those we hold in our hearts and have lost to death. Before we go further, let’s honor the loss we feel. Our faith does not deny our tears. The place in our lives that has been held by those we remember is still empty in many ways. What we say we believe doesn’t pretend away the sadness that many of us still feel when we close our eyes and see the face of those who have been so important to our lives. But the fact is, loss and grief are not the only things that take hold of us. John’s vision is more than a dream. This is real. Our loved ones, lost in death, are found in God, and with a whole multitude of saints on earth and in heaven, we know we are still connected to them by way of God’s eternal arms, which hold all of us forever.

No preacher has words that are any more powerful than the words the bible gives us today. We are in communion with each other and with every soul that has made the transition from here to there. As we lead into our time of Holy Communion today let me turn to the witness of the scripture which is the ground upon which we stand today. We are strong in our love of those who have died because...

“...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.
They will hunger no more, and thirst no more;

the sun will not strike them,
nor any scorching heat;
for 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.” (Revelation 7: 15-17)