

The Ones in White Robes

Revelation 7:9-17

Sermon preached on All Saints Day by Charles Watkins

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Some folks imagine that you think about heaven all the time. After all, you are religious, you go to church, and so some people expect that you are preoccupied with life after death, dreams of pearly gates and streets of gold, and pie-in-the-sky-by-and-by.

Many would be astonished to know how little thought you give to heavenly rewards when the roll is called up yonder.

In fact, you may be like the fellow who went to a tent meeting revival. As the preacher worked his way up to a fever pitch, he asked the congregation: "Do you want to go to heaven?"

Do you want to go to heaven? If you want to go to heaven, stand up." All the crowd leapt up except for Willard on the second row. He just sat there, looking down.

The preacher stopped his sermon, and said, "Willard, what's wrong with you? Don't you want to go to heaven?" And Willard answered, "O sure, I do. . . someday. It just sounded to me like you was getting up a bus load to go now."

Most Christians I know aren't really interested in going to heaven now. Instead they are primarily concerned with day-to-day life in this world today.

They want to be good people, honest, kind, and generous, and they come to church not for the sake of the future but for the sake of today. They come for encouragement and support and challenge for living the moral life and serving God in the world.

But once in a while, we need to lift our heads from the weary road of every day, and be reminded that our faith from the beginning has strongly affirmed life beyond death, resurrection of the redeemed, and commitment to the idea that Old Death does not have the final word over our lives or our ultimate destiny.

Frankly, the times in the church's life and in our own lives when we look out toward the life beyond this one are the really bad times – the hard and painful times, the time when death comes to our own family our own friend, the time when the world seems to rock and heave with waves of unwelcome change, or the time when the church's own survival is threatened.

It was a time like that, a time of danger and threat, that brought forth the Book of Revelation at the end of our Bible. St. John the Divine, the writer of this most misunderstood book in the Bible was imprisoned on a hot, little rocky island off the coast of Turkey in the Aegean Sea when he wrote down his exotic visions. And the members of the churches in Asia Minor for whom he wrote never knew from one day to the next whether they would live or whether they would die for their faith. Lots of Christians were being carted off in the night just because they were Christians.

Because near the end of the first century after Jesus, the movement which began in his name was officially against the law. The one central affirmation of Christian faith then, as now, was this: Jesus is Lord.

But the single essential pledge of allegiance required by the emperor of Rome was this: Caesar is Lord.

And as Jesus himself taught, one cannot serve two masters. There can be only one Lord of your life.

So those who continued to insist that Jesus is Lord in violation of the laws of the empire and refused to bend the knee to Caesar were subject to arrest and torture and death. Those were the days when Christians were thrown to the lions for the amusement and gory entertainment of Roman crowds. Those were the days when Christians were hoisted onto poles in palace gardens and doused with lamp oil and set on fire. Those were the days when Christians were nailed to crosses and hung out to die.

The Book of Revelation has at its center one single purpose: to encourage Christians in imminent peril of their lives to hold fast to their faith, not to surrender to the emperor's terrorism against the church, not to let the church vanish from the earth.

John's visions of the heavenly places assured all threatened Christians that indeed God ultimately shall prevail over all that is evil, that everything that is crooked and wrong and rotten in the world will finally be made straight and right and pure in God's great victory over the powers of darkness and injustice.

Furthermore, there will be none more exalted in heaven than the holy martyrs, those Christians who have chosen to face torture and death rather than give in to the state religion and worship the emperor.

John's message is this: Keep the faith, hold fast to Christ, and never worship anything or anyone else, and if you do, then at last you shall see such glory and

participate in such joy that your present suffering will seem as nothing compared to that great victory.

Once you are fixed on that central message, you will not be disturbed by the strange and exotic and even weird imagery in Revelation. Indeed, you will find on closer study that almost every image and symbol in the book is borrowed straight out of the Old Testament or from the literature produced in those years between the two testaments.

The promises of Revelation are not really new promises, for from the beginning Jews and Christians have believed that God is finally the ultimate power in the universe and that God's righteousness and God's peace will eventually win the day against all that stands against God.

The Lord our God is One Lord, and besides God there is no other. God's judgments are righteous and true.

God is Light and in God there is no darkness at all. These ancient affirmations of essential biblical faith are found throughout the scriptures from the first sentence of Genesis through the last words of Revelation.

The mistake we most often make is to read the Book of Revelation as if it were a news account by a journalist – "this is Sylvia Pajoli speaking to you live from the streets of heaven" – you know, a report of facts.

Instead of reading it as a report and becoming totally befuddled, we need to read it as we would read a drama, an ancient play written by an artist who invites our imaginations to create the stunning scenes as they unfold. The writer of this drama works with characters already long established by tradition and with insights and understandings drawn from throughout the Hebrew scriptures. He takes all these elements from the tradition and sets them forth for an audience terrified and terrorized.

If you can picture yourself in their place, see yourself as one in danger of death because of your faith in God, and then if you can visualize each scene of the drama in turn, you may come much closer to having the eyes to see and the ears to hear what Christ says to you in these pages.

The reason most of us cannot understand the Book of Revelation is that we are just too well off. Life is too good. And so we just don't get it. It was not written for the satisfied and safe.

The scene in this morning's ready is the very throne of God in heaven, and gathered there before God a vast throng, which no one could count, from every nation. of all tribes, peoples, and languages standing in front of the throne.

So much for thinking of only a set number of souls or a group restricted by nation or race, for in this vision the multitude assembled is countless and all inclusive—

---every nation, all tribes, all peoples, all languages. And they are all robed in white with palms in their hands.

These are the company of the glorified and victorious faithful awaiting the final completion of God's purpose, those who remain loyal despite the pressures of persecution and the threats of death.

The white robes are from Isaiah and represent purity, the palm branches are from Second Maccabees and symbolize victory and joy after the fight. And these purified and victorious ones sing and shout hymns and praise along with the angels, and the elders, and the four living creatures.

In his vision John learns that the white robed ones are those who have passed through the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the lamb— that same lamb whose picture is carved into the front and center of our communion table. This is a dramatic way of saying that those who are now clothed in purity are glorified because of the death of the Lamb of God, Jesus, not because of their own righteousness. What they have done is to uphold the name of Jesus in spite of the death imposed by Rome.

And now those who trusted Jesus stand before the throne of God, and drawing from the Psalms and the prophet Isaiah, John affirms they shall never again feel hunger or thirst, the sun shall not beat on them nor any scorching heat, for the Lamb who is at the heart of the throne will be their shepherd and will guide them to the springs of the water of life; and God will wipe every tear from their eyes.

You see, even when the world has done its very worst, slaughtered the innocent, killed the faithful, and rejected the authority of God who made heaven and earth— even when fathers are killed for entertainment and mothers burned and little children put to the sword, still God is God. God is God and the evil of this world and its darkness shall not have the final say over us.

Even when cancer ravages the body and a little one dies having hardly had a chance to live, and the one we love best is buried in the earth, still God is not

mocked, God's loving purpose is not defeated, God's lordship over heaven and earth is not cancelled. And, by the way, all the terrible things that happen in our lives are not God's doing, not God's will, not God's fault, not God's idea.

For all those we love and see no more, are with the Lord, led by the shepherd to the springs of the water of life, and the Lord God the almighty and Eternal One wipes every tear from their eyes.

In the New Testament, all believers in Christ are referred to as Saints, not because we are holy but because the God whom we trust is Holy and makes us pure and perfect in God's sight. And that includes you. In biblical language all of you who gather at the Lord's Table today are part of the company of the saints. And what you are here to do in this hour is to praise God, which is exactly what the saints in heaven are doing even at this moment.

When you come to church, when you pray at home, when you act faithfully in your life, when you join the struggle for justice and peace in the world, you are joining the saints of God in holy alliance against evil and darkness and terror and death. When you gather at the Lord's Table to celebrate Christ's victory over death, you are joined by the company of all the saints both in earth and in every land and in heaven.

As you sing hymns of praise, your voices are joined with voices you cannot hear. As you work to make the world more just, you have the strength of all the saints to help you. And apparent defeat and disappointment in this struggle are not final. For even against death God still has the last word. And that word is victory to the faithful, the death of death, and hell's destruction.

My friends, today we celebrate the resurrection of all the faithful, the salvation of those robed in white by the redeemer's love, the exaltation in glory of those whom we love and see no more. For God's love is as much greater than ours as God's power is greater than ours. And God's promises throughout scripture and in John's vision are for us.

So we do not grieve like people who have no hope, for with the eyes of faith ourselves we can see that innumerable throng of white robed ones from every time and every race and every nation gathered before the throne of God. And we see God stooping over in love to wipe every tear from their eyes.