

“A Great Multitude”

Revelation 7: 9-17

After 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. ¹⁰ They cried out in a loud voice, saying,

“Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!”

¹¹ And 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, ¹² singing,

“Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom
and thanksgiving and honor
and power and might
be to our God forever and ever! Amen.”

¹³ Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, “Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?” ¹⁴ I 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.

¹⁵ For 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.

¹⁶ They will hunger no more, and thirst no more;
the sun will not strike them,
nor any scorching heat;

¹⁷ 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.”

The book of Revelation may seem like an odd choice for our All Saints' Day celebration. But in reality, it is the perfect book for such an occasion. On the day when we remember those who have gone on before us, we want a word of hope. On the day when we remember those who formed us, shaped us and touched our lives, we want a word of comfort. On the day which is a somber yet celebratory time of worship, when we remember those to whom we have said good-bye, we want a word which will strengthen us for journey ahead. And that word comes from this vision found in the book of Revelation.

Now, I will admit, that there are some parts of this book that are way out there and yes even a little scary. That's the style of apocalyptic writing: Crazy visions, strange imagery, darkness and despair but there is also the promise that God is in control, that God has the last word. In the midst of the crazy visions and strange imagery, there is also a word of hope. There is also a word of new life. And that is what we get in our text.

In our Scripture today, we have a beautiful description of a heavenly vision with a multitude of people too many to count, a multitude of all of God's people from different nationalities, from different cultures, from different continents and yes from even different centuries- are all gathered around the throne of God, worshipping God, living in the very presence of God. What better news of comfort and hope do we need this day?!

This vision opens our eyes to the promises that God has already given to us. This vision reaffirms our belief. It reaffirms our confidence in our God, our God who has brought us safe this far?! This vision reminds us that we are not alone on this journey of faith.

Rather, we are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses who have walked where we have walked, witnesses who have left us testimonies and stories of their acts of faith. We cling to these testimonies, to these stories when the darkness threatens to overtake us.

That's what this vision is for us. It is a wonderful reminder that God's people will overcome their great ordeals. It is a reminder for us that this world does not have the last word. Instead, we are told that the "saints of God have moved beyond this life and have begun to participate in the triumph of God's heavenly court."

This is a wonderful message for us who have had to say our painful goodbyes, people who are feeling the darkness and despair beginning to overtake us. This vision serves as a reminder for us as the people of God that we have hope all because we have found new life through the love and grace of our God.

For us to really understand the magnitude of this promise, I want us to take a look at the background of this Scripture. As you may know, the book of Revelation

was written by a man named John. John was in exile and he had been given these visions which he was supposed to share with the early churches and Christian community at that time. The visions came to John in a time when darkness, persecution and division threatened to overtake the world.

For the people of God, it seemed as if evil is winning. Then in the midst of all this, an angel comes to John and instructs him to open seven seals. I will be the first to admit that as we read the beginning of Revelation, and with each opening of these individual seals, things seem to go from bad to worse so much so that the very foundations of the earth begins to crumble.

With each passing moment, there is destruction everywhere. People are afraid. They run and hide, trying to escape this overwhelming, life-draining darkness and destruction. The people of God are fearful for their lives. They have lost all hope in the larger good news given to them by Jesus.

So it should be no surprise that after opening the sixth seal, John is asked a very odd question, that question being “Who will stand after this destruction?” I’m sure at this point, the prophet John is thinking, Well no one. How can we survive such an ordeal? But then the angel shows John a new vision. This vision is peaceful. It is comforting. It is like a safe port in a massive storm. A pause in the middle of a cacophony of sound. A moment of quiet in the midst of chaos.

We get this beautiful vision, a moment of peace, a moment of hope. We get this vision of God's people, spanning the centuries, spanning the continents of the globe, spanning the rich tapestry of cultures, all together, worshipping God, living in the very presence of God. And now we know the answer to the question that was asked of John, the question being, "In the end, Who will stand?"

This vision replies to this question with a resounding joyous response, telling all with eyes to see and ears to listen, it tells us that in the end, God's people will stand. God's people will continue despite the darkness, despite the destruction, despite the fear. In the end, God's people will stand all because of the promises which God has given to God's people, promises which strengthen us for the journey ahead.

We are told once and for all, that the darkness will not overcome the light. There will be a multitude filled with too many people to count, people from all nations, from all continents, from all cultures, from all centuries who will stand and be a part of this heavenly vision of peace and hope. But the beauty of this vision doesn't stop there.

You see, the wonderful thing about this text is that we are never told what the "great ordeal" is that this multitude actually faced. We assume persecution, knowing the context of this Scripture but we don't really know. And that is the gift

which keeps on giving. By not naming a specific great ordeal, John does not limit God in what God can do! By letting us fill in the blank, fill in the blank with whatever we are going through, John's message of hope and comfort transcends time and place.

Whether our great ordeal is losing a job, or losing a loved one, whether it is painful treatment of cancer or a broken life-long relationship, whether it is loss of security or loss of movement in our bodies, whether it is a global pandemic or an election which leaves us stressed over the outcome, we have the promise God can and will see us through.

Sure it may not be the outcome we expect. Nor are we promised that the outcome will happen on our time schedule. However we are promised that it will happen. God will bring us safely through to the other side. We know that regardless of whatever our own personal or communal "great ordeal" may be, God walks with us just like God has been doing for the people of God since the beginning of time. God has never left God's people alone. And God is not about to start now.

As people of faith, we know God has been, is now, and forever will be there to strengthen us, to give us hope and comfort, to see us through the darkness time and time again.

This is the best message that we can hear again today as a community of faith. This is the message we need to hear again today: God will never leave us alone. Even when we walk through the darkest valleys, we will fear no evil because God is there to comfort us and keep us safe. When we are going through our great ordeals, whatever they may be, God is there, holding us in the palm of God's hand, never leaving our side.

All we need to do is look to this great multitude of saints to know that this is true. This multitude is made up of God's people: past present and future. This multitude that is made up of God's people whose "acts of faithfulness may have been public or private; their names and faces may or may not be acknowledged or remembered by the world. This multitude which spans the nations, the centuries, the cultures, the continents, people who dedicated their lives to the service of God as people of faith here on earth. This multitude of saints knows and is completely known by the Good Shepherd, who claimed each and every one of them and knows them all by name.

This is why we celebrate. This is why we remember. We know that until the day when God's Kingdom is fully realized here on Earth, God's presence is among the people of God. In response to this life-giving news, we live our lives in hope, not fear. We live out the good news of God's transforming and welcoming love so that all will know God's compassion and grace. We live out our faith, knowing that

God's love will always have the last word. So today and all days, let us join with the multitude of saints in heaven, praising God, and giving thanks to one from whom all blessings flow. Amen.