

November 7, 2010

Scripture: Revelation 7: 9-17

Sermon: "God will wipe away every tear from their eyes"

The book of Revelation may seem like an odd book to be reading 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 that is a somber yet celebratory time of worship, when we remember those to whom we have said good-bye as our loved ones here on Earth, we want a word that 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 seem 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 always the promise that God is in control and that God has the last word. There is always a word of hope. There is always a word of new life.

And that is what our text is about today. In our Scripture today, we have a beautiful description of a heavenly vision where a multitude filled with 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-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 and our confidence in our God who has brought us safe this far?! This vision reminds us that we are not alone on this journey of faith, that We are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses that have walked where we have walked, that have left us testimonies and stories of their acts of faith to strengthen our faith and to encourage us with the darkness threatens to overtake us, a vision that reminds us that God's people will overcome their great ordeals and will found new life because at the heart of this vision is that the "saints of God have moved beyond this life and have begun to participate in the triumph of God's heavenly court."

A wonderful message and vision for us that have said our painful goodbyes because this vision serves as a reminder of hope and a reminder for us here on earth to have hope because it is in this hope of God that we find new life.

Let me give you a little background to this Scripture to help us really understand why the Book of Revelation is such good news for us modern day Christians. As you may know, the book of Revelation is written by a man named John who is in exile and has been given visions that he is supposed to share with the early churches and Christian community at that time. He is given these visions, this word of hope, in a time when darkness, persecution, division, threatens to overtake the world and it seems as if evil is winning.

And so John is instructed to open seven seals and it seems that with opening of each of these individual seals, things go from bad to worse to the point where the very foundations of the earth begin to crumble. There is destruction everywhere. Darkness is really taking over. People are afraid and they going to run and hide to escape this darkness and destruction, fearful for their lives and have lost all hope in the good news. After the sixth seal is opened, a question is asked of John, "Who will stand after this destruction?" This is the Revelation we remember. This is the Revelation that is used to create fear in believers' hearts. This is the Revelation that makes us what to ignore or hide from any discussion about the "end times."

But there is so much more to Revelation than death and destruction. We get chapter 7. We cautiously pause before reading the first verse of this chapter because we honestly don't know if we can take any more bad news...but from the very first line, we can tell it's different. It's peaceful. It's 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.

Up to this point, there has been destruction, death, darkness. And it has kept building and building. Destruction. Fear. Darkness. Destruction. Fear. Darkness It has kept building to this crazy, terrifying fever pitch and then....we get this beautiful vision, a moment of peace, a moment of hope. 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 then we know the answer to the question that was asked of John: In the end, Who will stand? The answer is God's people will. In the end, God's people will stand. God's people will continue despite the darkness, despite the destruction, despite the fear, God's people will stand because we know and we have the promises that God has given to us that strengthen us for the journey ahead. And the good news is that it doesn't say only a certain ones will survive or a certain number. The good news is that there is 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.

And because of this vision of hope, we who are left on earth, can confidently say that like the multitude, we will finish the race, we will stand, we will continue the good fight because we know we are not alone. We know that we are surrounded by God's saints, God's people who survived a great ordeal, God's people who walked through the darkest valley and now are here beside still cool waters, God's people who are here, in the very presence of God, praising, worshipping God because God has brought them safely through to the other side. A great cloud of witness inspiring us to become the people that God created us to be here on earth and to continue God's saving work here on earth, working towards that peaceable kingdom where all are welcomed and live in peace.

And that is the good news this morning! In spite of the chaos that threatens to destroy our world sometimes, we can stand with the saints, praising God, because we know that God will see us through. We will stand and survive all of our great ordeals because we know that our God is in control and that

God has the last word. We know from the saints that have gone on before us that God is like a shepherd that will lead us through the darkest valleys and give us comfort at cool streams

The wonderful thing about this text is that we are never told what the “great ordeal” that this multitude actually faced. We assume persecution, knowing the context of this Scripture but we don’t really know. And because we don’t know, we are able to fill in the blank with our own personal “great ordeals” and that is even more good news to our weary and worried souls because we are not limiting God and what God can do! Our God can and will do anything to bring us comfort and hope. Our God can and will overcome anything because God has the last word.

It is the not knowing exactly what the “great ordeal” really is that gives this text it’s timeless quality and gives us comfort and hope. we as people of faith are able to fill in the blank with whatever we are going through as the great ordeal, whether that be losing a job, or losing a loved one, whether that be painful treatment of cancer or a broken life-long relationship, whether that be loss of security or loss of movement in our bodies. We know that we are not alone. God is with us. We are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses. We are held in the palm of God’s hand. And we are safe and secure from all this world’s alarms.

Regardless of whatever our own personal or communal “great ordeal” may be, we are able to hear the good news from this text, that God will bring us through safely to the other side, that God walks with us, that God will lead us, that God is there to strengthen us, is there to give us hope and comfort always.

This vision reaffirms our faith in the promises of God, reaffirms our confidence that we shall overcome, reaffirms our understanding that God is in control. Like the saints gathered around the throne of God, We are able to celebrate and praise God even in our darkest hour because we know and have experienced the hope of God which strengthens us for the journey ahead.

We have this vision of the multitude of all of God’s people, worshipping and praising God to remind us that darkness, destruction and death do not have the last word. God does.

And our job as people of faith here on earth is to live in hope, not fear, to live out the good news of God’s transforming and welcome love and grace, to share God’s blessings with all of God’s children. Our job as people of faith is to trust in God and to continue God’s saving work of compassion, justice, peace here on earth, confident that God is in control and that God has the last word.

This is the best message that we can hear again today as a community of faith and need to hear again today: God is in control. 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, God is there, holding us in the palm of God’s hand. When the sea seems so big and our boats seem so small, God is there, leading us to safety once more.

And we need to look no farther than this great multitude of saints to remember these promises. this multitude is made of up 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 that spans the nations, the centuries, the cultures, the continents, that gave their lives to the service of God as people of faith here on earth. This multitude that trust and worships “the Lamb of God who has become the Shepherd, that knows them all by name.”

God watched over them through their great ordeal so why should we expect anything less? We know that there is a multitude of witnesses in heaven, filled with people too many to count, people from across time, from across the continents of the globe, from across the centuries, from across nationalities gathered at the throne of God, singing and praising God, thanking God for leading them through the great ordeal.

And until that day that we are called to join that multitude, we are called to live an authentic faith here today in our present reality that finds strength and encouragement and hope from the future possibilities of the Kingdom of God. We are called to live out our vision of authentic faith here on earth by offering up opportunities to all of God’s children for healing, for grace, for peace, for love.

And until that day, we are called to shape a way of living that incorporates worship, justice, peace into everything that we do.” We are called to let this world know that we are Christians by our love. We are called to live lives of authentic faith by recognizing the image of God found in all of God’s children, by making justice for all of God’s creation, by praising God from whom all blessings flow. We are called to share the hope of God’s Kingdom with all by living in true relationship with all of our brothers and sisters through Christ.

May we join with the multitude of saints in heaven, praising and thanking God, gaining strength for the journey ahead.

Amen.