

A Glorious Future
November 2, 2008: 11:00 a.m. Service

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. They cried out in a loud voice, saying, "Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!"

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 worshipped God, singing, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen."

Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?" 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."

"For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship the Lord day and night within God's 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."

One: This is the Word of the Lord. **All: Thanks be to God!**

This is the first time that I have ever preached on the book of Revelation, which is the most misinterpreted and misunderstood book in the entire Bible. People have incorrectly read Revelation for centuries as if it is a road map for the Second Coming. You are probably aware that hundreds of books have been written that claim to provide the key to unlocking the supposed code in Revelation.

The apocalypse is a topic of great interest. More than sixty-five million books have been sold in The Left Behind series. There are even movies and video games based on The Left Behind series. Those books are imaginative fiction and a compelling read for many, but are absolutely unbiblical. This week, I googled "End of the World Predictions" and there are over 1,750,000 links related to that topic. Apparently now there are several groups who think the world is going to end in 2012 because of one of Nostradamus' predictions and the fact that the Mayan calendar ends in 2012. I would not hold my breath if I were you. There are at least 250 times that religious sects or groups have predicted the end of the world: and, of course, all of them have been wrong. Jehovah's Witnesses alone have proclaimed the world would end on nine separate occasions.

At least a dozen people, mostly non-church members, have asked me about the apocalypse in the last couple of years. Usually when I admit that I do not know exactly

how the world will end, I get some response like, “Oh, so you don’t *really* know about Revelation.” I may not have the answers they are looking for, but I believe no human being has the precise answers to those questions. Why: because the Bible tells us so. In 1st Thessalonians, the apostle Paul writes that the Lord will come like a thief in the night, at a time and moment when no of us expects.¹ Jesus himself said that he did not even know the day or hour when God would return.² Do we claim to know more than God’s own Son or the person who wrote more books of the Bible than anyone else? As much as it would be nice to be able to plan ahead, we will never be able to fully comprehend and predict God’s return.

Please hear me: I am NOT saying that this book is worthless. I am hoping we can reclaim Revelation from the fundamentalists who have co-opted, oversimplified, and reduced its meaning. Revelation has tremendous power: it can become a source of inspiration, truth, and hope for us, just as it uplifted members of the early church as they faced turmoil and persecution.

Justo and Catherine Gonzalez have written, “What John was telling his original readers is that Christians must live their lives, not out of present pressures and expediencies, but rather out of the vision of the future that they derive from their faith.”³ On this Sunday closest to All Saints Day, the occasion in the church year where we remember all Christians who have died, especially those church members and other loved ones who have passed away in the last year, Revelation is good news to us. Revelation gives us a glimpse into our ultimate destiny and its implications for our daily lives.

Revelation, especially what we read in chapter 7, is relevant to the church in any age because it acknowledges three things: first pain, suffering, and death are part of the human experience. Second, the Lamb who was slaughtered has given us our victory and we can look forward to a time when we will hunger and thirst no more. Third, our hope in God for a brighter future helps us to live here and now with a sense of purpose and direction.

This text gives us a vision of the glory of heaven: not to be taken literally, but to evoke our imagination and to give us a picture of what heaven might look like. I’d like to try to unpack some of the images for you. The Lamb is symbolic for Jesus, who is slaughtered for our sake. Ironically, the Lamb becomes our Good Shepherd, protecting and providing for us. The white color of the robes symbolizes victory and purity: this is not a victory we have won on our own since we have been redeemed through the blood of the Lamb. Numbers also have significance in Revelation. This chapter begins with a description of the 144,000 Jews who would be saved, along with more Gentiles present in heaven than anyone could count. Some people have tried to say that means only 144,000 people will be saved, which is not what the text is saying at all.

John’s original audience would have understood that twelve was a number that represented all God’s people: there were twelve tribes in Israel. Twelve squared is 144.

¹ 1st Thessalonians 5:2.

² Matthew 24:35-36.

³ Catherine & Justo Gonzalez, Commentary on Revelation: Westminster Bible Companion, p. 11.

So the 144,000 means that John is referring to all people who have experienced God's salvation.

It is okay if you do not understand all the symbolism: the main point is that we will all, male and female, Jew and Gentile, be unified in purpose in heaven as we praise and serve God together. The climax tells us that in God's presence, we will hunger and thirst no more. We hunger and thirst for food and drink, but also for nourishment that will give us peace amidst life's tribulations. As we shared prayer requests at the contemporary service this morning, I was reminded of how pain touches so many of our lives. The Good News we hear in Revelation is that God will wipe away all the tears from our eyes.

Earlier this week, I was walking around a lake. I heard some crying as I was walking and found a father and his young son. They had brought some bread and were sitting on the docks, feeding the ducks. One of the ducks had flown onto the dock and had scared the boy. The father held his son and showed him that he would protect him, not letting that duck or anything else hurt him. The boy's tears were wiped away and he eventually calmed down. That scene made me think of God's promise in Revelation 7 to wipe our tears away like a mother or father tenderly nurtures his or her crying child.

That scene by the lake also reminded me of a story I heard once. A father and his daughter were driving with the windows down on a beautiful fall afternoon, not very different from today. A bumblebee flew into the car. The little girl was scared. Her father reached out and caught the bumble in his hand, and then released it.

The girl grew frantic as it buzzed by her and wondered why in the world her father had let the bee go. Once again the father reached out his hand, but this time, he pointed to his palm. There stuck in his skin was the stinger of the bee. "Do you see this?" he asked. "You don't need to be afraid anymore. I've taken the sting for you." We do not need to fear death anymore. Christ has died and risen again. He has taken the sting from death.⁴

Revelation 7 is good news because, even though it does not tell us what the furniture in heaven will look like or when Christ will come again, it does promise us that our future is secure. The events in our lives are not random: God is in control and there is a greater purpose. That helps me savor the here and now that much more, because I know that our labors on this earth will not be done in vain. Death's sting has been taken away: through the Lamb, we can all have direction for how to live our lives today and hope for tomorrow. Thanks be to God! Amen.

⁴ Edward K. Rowell, 1001 Quotes, Illustrations, & Humorous Stories, p. 227.