

The Water of Life

Revelation 7:9-17

November 6, 2011 (All Saints Sunday) – Browns Point UMC

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It is always tempting to leave out the readings from Revelation. There aren't many in the lectionary (our list of Bible readings for the year), and with good reason: Revelation was one of the most heavily debated "books" that finally made it into the Bible, and it might be the least understood of them all. Part of the difficulty with Revelation is that it's a letter – an open, public letter, but a letter nonetheless – written from John to seven churches in modern-day Turkey around the end of the first century. These churches all had one major thing in common: they were part of Greco-Roman culture, and as such, were persecuted for their faith: some had been arrested or exiled, and many had already been martyred. John writes from the island of Patmos of visions God has given him concerning the final judgment *and redemption* of these suffering people. It was undoubtedly an incredibly encouragement to them, but it was never meant to be a predictor of the "end times" in our day – in fact, it wasn't written for *us* at all. It's a letter full of metaphors and images, one best read not with the logical mind but with the imagination, where those images might come alive.

Today's reading from revelation comes just after the "sealing" of 144,000 Israelites, servants of God from the twelve tribes of Israel, the original chosen people from the Old Testament. At first, it would seem John is saying they are still the chosen ones at the end of this life; and if chapter 7 ended with verse 8, it would seem they are the *only* ones, that the earliest followers of God continue in God's favor, but no one else is invited in.

Thankfully, the reading we heard this morning picks up in verse 9, where there is an uncountable multitude from every nation, tribe, people, and language, all standing before the throne of God in their white robes. The 144,000 originals are still there, of course, but the vision has expanded to include *all* of God's children, Israelites and Gentiles, modern-day Catholics and Protestants, young and old. And this crowd sings hymns of praise forever – isn't that how you imagined heaven to be? Singing hymns without end? And John learns in the vision that these folks in the white robes have been washed in the cup of salvation, coming out of the "great ordeal," the persecution they have experienced, where the Lamb who has become the shepherd guides them continually to the water of life, and where there is no more hunger or thirst, no more parched throats or scorching heat, no more tears or crying or pain.

That doesn't sound so bad, now, does it? There are no streets of gold in this particular image, but it's pretty pleasant nonetheless, even to us whose "great ordeal" might not include persecution or martyrdom. And it sounds like an appropriate thing to read on All Saints Day, when we celebrate those who have died, those who we imagine already clothed in washed robes, singing hymns of praise to God in eternity.

But it's important to think seriously about who's there: who's in that uncountable multitude? Is it just the people who have been officially named as saints like St. Francis or St. Peter, those whose names are on churches all over the world? Those who lived pious and upright lives and then had at least three miracles accounted to them after death? Those who lived perfectly the beatitudes we heard read from Matthew's gospel: those who were meek,

merciful, pure-in-heart, and peacemakers, among other things? People way *better* at being holy than us? Is it a multitude of perfect people, or those nearly perfect?

Or could it be that that uncountable multitude is made up of people whose names we have never heard in history books or devotionals, who had just a handful of people at their memorial services, who disappeared from the earth without worldwide fanfare or televised funerals or faces on the cover of Newsweek? Could it be that that uncountable multitude is made up of people like *us*?

As I hear more and more about the preparations Pam Mueller and our children's ministry team are making for this year's Christmas pageant, I have images in my head of little girls and boys in white robes with those garland halos bobbing over their heads on bent coat-hangers, singing sweetly and slightly off-key our favorite Christmas carols, their cherub faces lit by candlelight. And some of those little "angels" are usually the kids we find most challenging, aren't they? And we laugh to ourselves and think, "how ironic that little *Johnny* is an angel this year..." or "if only Susie would act like an angel more often..." But if we look more closely into their faces while they're singing, we can see it: we see the light of Christ in their eyes; we see the image of God in which they were created.

And that is possible for all of us, too: because as Christians, we earn our halos through our baptism. We are not born into this faith – we are grafted in, washed in the water of life and given a place in the body of Christ. In the waters of our baptism, we are made to belong in the people of God, and in essence, we are given our little garland halos, which bob around above our heads throughout our lives.¹ Now some of us admittedly live into this vocation more than others – some of us *strive* toward holiness more than others, but the image of God is there in all of us, whether we're responsible for miracles or not. It's our spiritual heritage, not our familial lines or even our perfectly pious actions, that lead us toward sainthood. Which means the person sitting next to you is holy, too. And the kid that you think talks too much, and the guy who occasionally snores in church, and the one you just don't understand... and the young ones who get/got their Bibles today: saints in the making, every one, washed in the life-giving waters of baptism.

One of the greatest gifts of seminary for me was the fellow students I met there. They were full of life and energy and ideas and experiences: called and gifted for the work of ministry. They give me hope in the future of the church in a way that a church renewal program or a megachurch expansion never could. Every day for four years, I sat in classrooms full of saints: flawed ones, of course, but saints nonetheless. At one point, one of those saints invited me to come help lead worship – playing guitar and singing – for a South Carolina Conference youth retreat in Myrtle Beach.

Now I don't know how many of you have been to Myrtle Beach, and I'm sure there are parts of it that are nice, but from what I saw, it's a pretty tacky tourist town, perfectly set up for college students to spend spring breaks crammed into gross hotel rooms and for families with kids to play round after round of miniature golf. But on that particular weekend, hundreds of

¹ I owe this little garland halo image to Barbara Brown Taylor's sermon, "The Company of Heaven," published in *Mixed Blessings* (Cambridge: Cowley, 1998), p. 79.

high school students descended on a musty old beachfront hotel in Myrtle Beach for a weekend of worship and fellowship unlike anything I'd been a part of. I met amazing young people there, with hearts on fire for God: young saints if there ever were any – but the moment that stands out most for me during that weekend was when the worship team led the whole assembly in a song called, “All who are thirsty...”:

All who are thirsty / all who are weak /
come to the fountain / dip your heart in the streams of life /
let your pain and your sorrow / be washed away
in the waves of his mercy / as deep cries out to deep
and we sing come, Lord Jesus, come / come, Lord Jesus, come...²

When we sang “Come, Lord Jesus,” we were asking for God’s presence in that musty hotel ballroom, and those young people fell on their knees in prayer on that stained old carpet, because they were so thirsty for the water of life, for the streams of mercy. They had tried to satisfy their thirst again and again with things of this world, forgetting the waters of their baptism and putting their hope in things that would never be enough; and they prayed and sang earnestly that night that God might come into that room and wash them clean, that they might begin again in God’s presence on the journey toward holiness.

But this week, reading today’s text from Revelation, I realize there’s more to it: when we sing, “Come, Lord Jesus,” we are praying not only for God’s presence in this room, but also for that day to come when all of us will be part of that multitude too great to count, gathered around the throne in our white-washed robes, singing praises while the Lamb who is the shepherd leads us again and again to the waters that initially gave us life and continue to quench our thirst day after day. We are praying for that day when our sainthood will be revealed, our garland halos exchanged for crowns, when the waters of our baptism will satisfy our thirst forevermore. Come, Lord Jesus, Come. Amen.

² Song words by Brenton Brown.