

Silent Partners
Revelation 7:9-17
May 8, 2022

As we prepare to hear the scriptures this morning, a bit of background. The Apostle John, one of the disciples of Jesus, has been exiled to the island of Patmos because he was talking about Jesus too much, and the Roman Empire wanted to keep him quiet. I visited the island of Patmos on my Greece trip last summer. It is off the coast of Turkey. We went to the cave where many believe he received a vision from God.

We don't know if John was alone or had others with him, but I can imagine he spend much time alone. During this time, John was given a vision by God. It was on the Lord's Day or Sabbath. An angel instructed him to write down what he saw; we know it as the Book of Revelation.

In the section we are reading today, we are in the middle of a worship service happening in heaven that began several chapters earlier. Before we read it, let us pray....

Stir in us now, Holy Spirit, a willingness to hear, the desire to know the truth and the courage to follow in joyful obedience, that we may be formed by your word into women and men of faith. Amen

Revelation 7:9-17 (invite to join with me as multitude)

⁹ After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands.¹⁰ And they cried out in a loud voice:

"Salvation belongs to our God,
who sits on the throne,
and to the Lamb."

¹¹ All the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, ¹² saying:

“Amen!
Praise and glory
and wisdom and thanks and honor
and power and strength
be to our God for ever and ever.”

¹³ Then one of the elders asked me, “These in white robes—who are they, and where did they come from?”

¹⁴ I answered, “Sir, you know.”

And he said, “These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. ¹⁵ Therefore,

“they are before the throne of God
and serve him day and night in his temple;
and he who sits on the throne
will shelter them with his presence.

¹⁶ ‘Never again will they hunger;
never again will they thirst.

The sun will not beat down on them,
nor any scorching heat.

¹⁷ For the Lamb at the center of the throne
will be their shepherd;

‘he will lead them to springs of living water.’

‘And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.’”

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

This is an amazing passage with so many details. One of the hardest things for a preacher is to not share all the wonderful things he, or she, discovered while studying the passage. I try to discipline myself to taking one idea from the passage and elaborating on just that one point. I don’t know how many times as I finish writing, I go back and delete the wonderful parts that do not support my point. My finger hovers over the delete key agonizing over the loss to come.

This passage was particularly difficult because of all the wonderful details. So wonderful, that instead of deleting all the wonderful details, I changed the point of my sermon so I could include all the wonderful concepts in this passage.

For example: did you notice the palm branches? I wonder as John saw those palm branches, he thought about that day when Jesus rode into Jerusalem before his crucifixion and people took palm branches to praise his name. I wonder if he thought about how different this crowd in heaven was from the crowd that day in Jerusalem. The earthly crowd turned against Jesus; this great multitude in heaven will praise the Lamb forever. In our worship services, we praise God week and after week just like the multitudes in heaven.

Or, how about the detail of the white robes worn by the multitudes, which our choir demonstrates every Sunday. These white robes have been washed in the blood of the Lamb. Last Tuesday during staff devotions as we looked at this passage, one of the staff asked if something is washed in blood how can it turn white.

It is an image I demonstrated during the children's sermon with a snowflake. A snowflake develops around a piece of dust. It is not pure white. But scripture (Psalm 51) says when we confess our sins, we are made whiter than snow. The piece of just is removed.

Throughout scripture, blood cleanses. The multitude have been made whiter than snow from the blood of the Lamb. In our worship services here at Valley, we have confession admitting that we are washed in the blood of the Lamb and receive cleansing and forgiveness – just like the multitudes in the worship service in heaven.

Or, how about other details of the Multitude. Besides dressed in white, there are so many that no one could count them. There is every nation, tribe, people and language.

I wrote in an email blast weeks ago of attending an Easter Vigil in a Catholic Church in Tucson. As a white person, I was in the minority. The service was expressed in four languages: Native American, Spanish, French, English – the languages of the congregation.

It was a glimpse of heaven, that multitude from every nation and people and language. I heard someone say if you are uncomfortable around people who are not like you, heaven will be a difficult place.

Then there is the tribulation detail. Revelation was written to Christians who were being persecuted for their faith. It was written to encourage them. Imagine how this chapter encouraged those who were suffering for Christ – to know that someday they will be part of the great multitude around the throne, and the promise that they will be protected by the Great Shepherd. They will no longer hunger or thirst, their tears will be wiped away, and they will be given springs of living water.

Imagine what this vision said to John: He had given his life to Christ. John had washed his robe in the blood of the Lamb. John was going through a time of tribulation. This vision would be his reward, too. He would stand in heaven one day waving a palm branch, dressed in a heavenly white robe. And he would no longer hunger or thirst, and God would wipe every tear from his eye.

This is our promise, too. We come on the Sabbath to worship together just like the multitudes in heaven. Just as they received encouragement, how much more for you who have or will or are experiencing tribulation in your life

It is when we come together in worship, as the saints in our passage, we have the assurance that God is still here in this life, that God hasn't left us, that God is our shepherd, too. We don't go to church just for private devotions. We go as part of a congregation. We come together with others to share the hope.

This multitude down through the ages has been called the communion of saints. About twenty-five years ago, a good friend of mine decided to become Catholic (after being a Protestant for many years). She went through hours of instruction, and often, she would share with me what she was learning.

I remember when she learned about the saints. It says in Hebrews 12, we have a cloud of witnesses that encourage us as we run our faith. "We aren't doing this alone," she said. I remember thinking how wonderful to have these saints, these witnesses, who encourage us in our faith walk.

I used to run, and participated in many races. All along the route are people encouraging us on when we got tired, offering us water, clapping for us. It even meant more when the cheering, especially at the end, was done by those who had already ran the race.

Consider the crowd of saints, this multitude in heaven, who have finished their race, and are now cheering us on. They lend support in ways we are only dimly aware, but I can imagine one of their roles is to pray for us. In fact, in the next chapter, there is an angel holding the prayers of the saints. The communion of saints. Our cloud of witnesses. Our silent partners in the faith.

So, I originally was going to talk just about these silent partners – that was going to be my one point, that we have a cloud of witnesses. But as I looked at all those other details, I realized I could not not talk about those details, so I came up with a new point or theme for this sermon. I talked about the details of this worship service in heaven, because this worship service in heaven breaks into earth, comes down to us, and we re-enact it here every Sunday morning.

The palm branches, the praises, the white robes, the multicultural multitudes, all breaking into our earthly worship service. What we do here every Sunday is a glimpse or foretaste of what we will experience in heaven. As the heavenly worship service continues on, its glory comes down to lift us up in our earthly worship, even as we go through our own tribulations.

In Sunday worship we practice heaven. In Sunday worship, heaven breaks in. So let us continue to learn how to praise the Lamb. Let us continue to confess our sins. Let us continue to look for ways to worship with those who are not like us. Let us remember if we come beaten down by tribulations, we have a promise of being led to springs of living water. Let us remember those silent partners, those communion of saints, who encourage us to move forward in our walk with Jesus, our Lamb.

May this vision in heaven give you strength for this life, and may you be renewed day by day.

Having heard these words, let us stand and affirm our faith together by saying The Apostle's Creed.