

**Shining in glory
All Saints Day
Sunday, November 1, 2020
Revelation 7:9-17
Chris Keating**

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***On All Saints day, we recall those who have faced the great ordeal. Those who shine in glory
give us courage to press forward, even in the face of pandemic and ongoing strife.***

After months of empty sanctuaries, John's vision in Revelation 7 hits us like a bucket of cold water thrown in our faces. Revelation seems scary enough to read, but John's words add an entirely different dimension.

Imagine John, his eyes wide with excitement, turning toward and saying, "You better get ready," he is telling us, "because there's a crowd coming to church this week.

As he puts it, "there was a great multitude that no one could count."

In this snippet from Revelation, I imagine John standing on his tippy-toes, straining to get a glimpse at the massive crowd arrayed before him. It's an supersized version of the opening ceremonies of the Olympics, an incalculable throng of every nation, every tribe, every race, people, and tongue all united in praising God.

Waving their palm branches, this white-robed crowd stands before the throne of the Lamb of God, Jesus, the savior. Their cries ring in our ears, Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!"

All of heaven shakes as their voices continue: "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen!"

Who are these persons, John wonders, and from where have they come? And that is our question as well: Don't they know that gathering in crowds is dangerous right now? If they managed to put on robes, couldn't they have grabbed a mask as well?

For many, simply opening the Book of Revelation creates waves of anxiety. It may feel a bit like the no-fly zone of the Bible to Presbyterians—territory much better left to Pentecostals and fundamentalists. Its imagery seems distant and more suited to science fiction than Sunday morning. Its passages are filled with mysteries and symbols.

But John's visions are packed with pastoral insights, and above all else carry a message of hope to a Christian community beleaguered by persecution and under constant threat. It's message

is a revealing – not of dates and exact prophesies of the end of time, but of the hope and heartbeat of the good news.

We avoid this book out of fear of what seems to be its words of, judgment—and if there is anything that Presbyterians dread more than 2 hour worship services it is anything reeking of “judgment.”

But this morning, John reveals to us the promise of God for the church. Sandwiched between words of harsh judgment comes the assurance of God that everything is going to be alright.

And that is the word we need to hear most of all.

Who are these persons? And what are they doing here on this first Sunday in November?

They are saints. Not just the capital “s” saints, but all who, to borrow from Paul, who have fought the good fight, finished the race and kept the faith. It is as inclusive a multitude as you can imagine.

Today we cannot help but stop and think of the saints who have passed before us this year. Our bulletin cover this morning recalls their faith: we see the warm smile of Howard Gleason, faithful servant of the lord, whose ministry spanned five decades; the gracious southern drawl of our friend Barb Slocum, the grins of Jim Lunan and Bob Vachalek. We think of their contributions to this church – and as we gather at this table, we know that they, too, are in communion with us.

They are young and ordinary persons like Carlos Acutis, an Italian teenager who died in 2006 from leukemia.

Carlos was a fairly typical teenager who loved video games, wore Nikes and made videos of his dog. Before his death, he created a website that chronicled stories of healing, leading some to call Acutis the somewhat unofficial “patron saint of the Internet.” In October, Pope Francis beatified Carlos making him the first millennial to be on the path to sainthood.

Carlos gathers with us today, along with Dave Jenne, Betty Prather, Steve Dull, Ene Denys, Merrill Woods, Larry May, Marty White, Cotton Faris Dana Rowlands and so many others whose lives touched our hearts and whose faith shaped our lives.

We gather with John Hughes, who always made sure our chairs were straight and our candles filled with oil. John took exceptional pride in making sure the sanctuary was “set” for Sunday mornings. John was a bit compulsive about this, so much so that David Prather would often move a chair slightly out of line when John was not looking just to get a smile on John’s face.

“These are they who have come out of the great ordeal,” the elder tells us. It is an ordeal so perplexing and soul crushing that we cannot fathom how we will survive. We have seen glimpses of that ordeal this year, for we know that the multitude includes the millions of those who have died from Covid 19, including the more than 200,000 from our country alone.

It is a crowd as diverse as those gathered before the Lamb: including more than a thousand inmates, and at least 60,491 nursing home residents in the United States. In all, more than 266,000 more people have died in the U.S. in 2020 than normally.

They are with us today. Like everything else about 2020, All Saints Day is different this year. Grief is deeper and more complex, and suffering is acute. In a world where it is all too much, we gather with the saints who have passed through the fiery ordeal, and whose testimony offers hope. We may see the Book of Revelation as nothing more than a Halloween fright fest, but pay attention to the hope that John offers to the living church, to those of us struggling with the impact of overloaded grief.

“Grief overload simply means you have been exposed to more loss than anyone could reasonably take in stride,” says grief expert Alan Wolfelt. “Even if you have coped well with death and loss in the past, you may be finding that the COVID-19 losses happening around you are different. This time you may feel helpless and hopeless. This time you may feel like you’re struggling to survive.”

In our grief, we are invited to hear the promise of God which John reveals to us today. It is a promise offered to the saints – the ordinary and the extraordinary, the dead and the living. It is a promise for those who grieve and for all of us who feel as though the vise-grip of grief has closed around us.

William Kent Krueger’s wonderful novel “Ordinary Grace” is a coming of age story about a boy named Frank. He is a preacher’s son, a boy coming of age in the summer of 1961 in Minnesota. In those hot summer days, Frank has a front-row seat on a series of deaths that change both the town and his family. In the middle of a great personal ordeal, his father preaches a sermon about the depth of their family’s struggles. “It isn’t Easter,” Frank’s father says, “but this week has caused me to think a lot about the Easter story. Not the glorious resurrection that we celebrate on Easter Sunday but the darkness that came before.”

It is in that darkness, he says, that the sunlight of God’s grace begins to rise. “In your dark night,” he says, “I urge you to hold to your faith, to embrace hope, and to bear your love before you like a burning candle, for I promise that it will light your way.” (p. 195)

Listening to the sermon, Frank says he experienced a miracle. As his father concluded the sermon, he smiled and said “Amen.” To which another person added “Amen,” and then another, and another, which Frank says, “was a most un-Methodist thing to do.” This is the promise John gives to us today. Hear it again:

You who are saints of the living God: You will not hunger. You will not thirst. The sun will not strike you, nor shall any scorching heat consume you. For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be our shepherd, and he will guide us to the springs of the water of life. And God will wipe away every tear from our eyes.

Amen.