

## HEAVEN

**TEXT:** Revelation 7:9-17

What is your picture of heaven? Over the centuries many imaginings have been put forth. There are the pearly gates with St. Peter checking the credentials of all seeking to enter. There are streets of gold where angels with harps parade before the chosen inhabitants. Then, of course, there are the inevitable jokes. You know, the story of the man arriving at the gates of heaven and is asked by St. Peter: “Religion?” The man answers “Methodist”. St. Peter looks down his list and says, “Go to Room 24, but be very quiet as you pass Room 8”. Another man arrives and when asked “Religion?” replies “Lutheran”. “Go to Room 18, but be very quiet as you pass Room 8”. A third man arrives and when asked “Religion?” replies “Presbyterian” and is directed to Room 11, “But be very quiet as you pass Room 8”. The man says “I can understand there being different rooms for different denominations, but why must I be quiet when I pass Room 8?” St. Peter tells him, “Well, the Baptists are in Room 8, and they think they’re the only ones here.”

This, of course, is a very old joke and it’s doctored to fit the denomination being addressed. But I have often wondered if perhaps the joke would be on all of us, when we dutifully entered through our respective gates and discovered that we were, in fact, all in the same place. I hope we would only stare at each other for a moment before we all burst out laughing and said, “Good one, God!”

Well, one of my favorite passages in the Bible is where it describes heaven and the joy of being in the presence of the Lord. Where nothing separates us from the love of our heavenly father. In this passage John covers a lot of territory, and he starts where we all begin our formal Christian life, giving the theology of baptism great depth of meaning. It calls Christians to remember that they are not sealed or baptized from challenges of life, but rather we are made ready to go through whatever comes against us in our faith journey. In other words, baptism does not exempt us from sickness, betrayals, wars and

other calamities, but our participation in it signals God's presence in and around our lives through and beyond this life.

Moreover, readers of Revelation are called to recognize the tension between the so-called "already", and the "not yet" – our lives in the "between times" – where we live our lives. In these times, God's faithful witnesses are gathered from every part of the world and they form what Revelation calls the "Israel of God", and they are from every nation and tribe and people and language. Revelation uses the term "Israel of God" to refer to the ecclesial faith community, and this is inclusive of all nations, races, ethnicities, tribes and languages from all over the world. This great multitude is countless.

I think some of the language John uses in the Book of Revelation troubles us because we really don't understand what he is talking about. When I was much younger, I really had a hard time with people washing their robes "in the blood of the Lamb". But I have come to realize that these people are those who have come out of the great ordeal. They have survived the bloody world and have made it to heaven in their white robes. White robes are a symbol of purity and of a pure heart.

But I also realize that the text does not say that these people have kept their clothes white all the time. It does not say that they never had gotten dirty. Rather, they have had their robes washed. That is why they are white. That means that they have not been clean and white all the time. They have gotten dirty. The people that make it into heaven are not the ones that have kept themselves from messing up. They are the ones that have been washed. That is why their robes are white.

Personally, I have to say that this is my only hope. Because I mess up a lot, and I am getting dirty all the time. But in Jesus Christ I am washed clean all the time. No one who makes it into heaven is really good enough to be there.

Consider what kind of people they were, the great persons that we read about in the Bible. There is David, the great king of Israel. He was an adulterer. And later, when his adultery was about to be disclosed, he became a murderer to cover it up. Consider the great apostle Paul. He was an accessory to murder. When the mob stoned the deacon Stephen to death, Paul stood by and watched and gave his assent to what they did. Consider the apostle Peter. He was a traitor. At the most crucial moment in Jesus' life, Peter denied that he had ever known him. These are the kinds of people that are giants in heaven. Adulterers, murderers, and traitors.

Why is that? Because they have washed their robes and made them white in blood. Their robes are not white because they kept them clean. They had gotten dirty. Very dirty. But they were washed in the blood of the Lamb. Everyone who makes it into heaven is there because they have put their faith in the grace of Jesus.

Most importantly, this passage reminds us that the vision for sainthood is all encompassing. It is all inclusive. The "great multitude" might include those who "washed their robes" by living lives worthy of standing around the throne of God, but never named the name of Jesus. The saints of God are those who are standing before the throne and before the Lamb in this life and in the life to come. They are a group of ordinary people--past, present and future--who have an extraordinarily close relationship with God. They are not perfectly sinless people, nor are they especially powerful people, but they are profoundly connected people: men and women who are linked directly to God and to the Lamb, Jesus Christ.

Today we celebrate those from our congregation and those in our own lives who have been lost during the past year. Our African American brothers and sisters traditionally call this Martyrs' Sunday. They commemorate those whose lives have been lost for the cause of justice and righteousness. In the New Testament, a martyr was one who, in life, bore witness to his faith in Christ and was celebrated in death. In early Christian history, martyrs were those who lost their lives during imperial persecution because of their devotion to Jesus Christ.

Today Martyr's Sunday celebrates the fine line that these people have walked between life and death and how meaning has been carved out of experiences that were meant to destroy their people. We can learn much from the African American interpretation of this reading. Through the years there have been so many painful goodbyes, but this text testifies to what so many of our foreparents knew, in spite of the goodbyes here, on the other side, all martyrs for the faith will receive a triumphant welcome, because they have overcome the world. Out of the African-American heritage came a song that has come to be referred to as the "African-American" national anthem. It speaks particularly of their tribulation, but speaks for all of those who came out of the tribulation to become the martyrs and saints we remember today. And it speaks of the hope, the courage, the faith of all those who dwell triumphant in the presence of our living God. Amen.