11-5/6-17 Rev. Amy Haines

Revelation 7:9-17 Songs of the Saints All Saints Day/Season of Saints Series

*How Great Thou Art. Amazing Grace. Hymn of Promise.*

How many of you have a memory associated with one of those great hymns of our faith? How many of those memories are from the funeral of a loved one, as you gave thanks for their life while you celebrated their faith?

One hymn I will always associate with my maternal grandparents is *Near to the Heart of God*.

Their four daughters and two granddaughters sang that hymn in three-part harmony for their 50th wedding celebration. My sister Jen and I then sang it at Grandpa’s memorial service.

When I served at Payne St Paul, there was an entire family who always cried when we sang the Easter hymn *In the Garden*. That hymn had been a favorite of their family member and had been sung at the funeral.

Nowadays the hardest song I struggle through at funerals is not a hymn, but the playing of *Taps*.

Music has a way of bringing out our emotions that words alone may not do. A love ballad may bring back romantic memories. A fight song will get a crowd cheering for their team. I had to laugh at one of the World Series games when the Astros came from behind and the loudspeaker played a snippet of *Staying Alive*. And then there are our memories associated with Christmas music.

St. Augustine is credited with saying that “A person who sings, prays twice.” Do you ever pay attention to the power of the words you sing during worship? Does a favorite hymn ever inspire your soul to soar in praise? Do you ever allow the words of a song to be the cry of your heart?

Today from the Book of Revelation we have an incredible glimpse of worship in heaven. A great multitude is singing and praising the Lord, radiant with an indescribable joy.

“Salvation belongs to our God, and to the Lamb!”

The vast, diverse multitude is comprised of believers from all times and all places, from every conceivable nation and tribe and ethnicity and language known to humankind. There are people present from all around the world, from every generation, yet they are now one church, one universal and unnumbered congregation, believers together before the throne of the Lamb, lifting up their glory and praise.

This heavenly congregation is greater in number than anyone can count. Imagine all of college football fans together in one place—and many more. Imagine a crowd greater than what Houston saw on Friday, or greater than the millions who converged on Cleveland to celebrate the Cavs championship.

While previous to today’s verses John saw a crowd who numbered 144,000, 1,000 faithful Israelites from each of the 12 tribes of Abraham, now John sees a multitude so large that no one can count them all. The diversity of such a multitude fulfills God’s promise to Abraham to save all nations, and exemplifies God’s inclusive love to all humanity.

There are people as far as the eye can see.

And every person in this vast and diverse multitude is also dressed in a pure white robe. They now wear the robe that designates them as part of the family of God, God’s beloved sons and daughters.

In their hands they wave palms, which at the time of the early church were the symbol of royalty and the symbol of victory.

All are engaged in worship.

Whether they can sign in eight-part harmony or have never been able to do much more than make a joyful noise, imagine the rich sounds of praise lifted up to honor God.

“Salvation belongs to our God, and to the Lamb!”

Then the multitude is joined by the voices of the angels. And from the depths of their souls, from the bottom of their hearts, all join together in honoring God with what has been called the sevenfold amen, seven perfect words of praise.

“Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving

and honor and power and might

be to our God forever and ever and ever!”

What an image of praise!

As John of Patmos is seeing and hearing this vision of worship, one of the elders comes over to John, and asks him, “Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?” John knows what he doesn’t know. So he replies, “Sir, you are the one that knows.” The elder does know, and he tells John, and through John, tells all of us: “These are those coming out from the great suffering, and they have washed their robes and whitened them in the blood of the lamb.”

Then the elder shifts from speaking to singing, indicated in the Greek text of Revelation by a shift from prose to poetry.

“This is why they are before God’s throne,  
serving night and day in God’s temple,  
and the One seated on the throne dwells among them.

“They do not hunger anymore,  
            they do not thirst anymore.  
The sun does not beat down on them,  
            nor any burning heat.

“For the lamb in the midst of the throne shepherds them,  
            and leads them to the streams of the water of life,  
and God wipes every tear from their eyes.”                                 
                      --Rev 7:15-17, translation Taylor Burton-Edwards umcdiscipleship.org

The vast multitude robed in white are coming out from the great ordeal, a time of suffering, a time of hardship. While scholars speculate which great ordeal is referred to here, I found several who made note that while the NRSV and other biblical translations say “These are they who have come out from…” the Greek is actually the present tense, meaning “These are they who are coming out from…”

--Walter Taylor Jr 4-25-10 workingpreacher.org

Friends, that difference makes this passage good news even for us here today!

It is not referring just to some specific time of persecution in the past. It is not referring just to some future tribulation before Christ comes again. Instead, this verse is referring to all, in anytime and anyplace, who have and are and will continue to come out from hardship and struggle. This is an ongoing reality. The good news is that this multitude continues to grow with faithful believers each and every day!

So imagine who all may be a part of that great multitude.

Several years ago Martha Greene [in the Christian Century] named some who may be part of the redeemed. She said: “Who is among them? There is Steven who was stoned and St. Peter who was crucified. There is Oscar Romero with the eucharistic prayer of thanksgiving still issuing from his mouth; Dietrich Bonhoeffer, triumphant over the Nazi gallows; Martin Luther King Jr. still praying that his dream will come true for humanity; Sudanese Christian boys gunned down in their villages by Muslim fanatics….”

… We see a procession of the faithful lined up in historical order, or maybe not, because order does not matter in the heavenly realm. Will those of whom we know nothing, whose tribulations are private, will they not also be in the great multitude?”

-Barbara Bruneau revgalblogpals.org 10-31-17

Maybe included in this heavenly multitude are Mother Teresa and St Francis of Assisi, Egyptian Coptic Christians and Iraqi citizens killed by Muslim extremists, men and women who taught us to love God and love our neighbor, family members and close friends we lift up by name this day.

Included in this heavenly multitude are not only those who were persecuted for their faith, but also those who died of natural causes yet sought to live for Christ in the midst of their daily lives.

This multitude is not comprised only of “super Christians” from throughout the centuries. It also includes ordinary people from all walks of life who have maintained close relationships with Jesus. While none of these saints were perfect people, they trusted in God’s presence and promises and peace.

We here today are called to follow in the footsteps of the saints who have gone before us. One way to follow in their footsteps is to cling to hope.

Our media constantly bombards us with bad news, with pessimistic outlooks on our society and our world, with stories of what divides us rather than stories of what unites us.

Yet our passage today from the Book of Revelation is good news that offers us hope, the hope that God is always with us and God has the final word over evil, injustice and oppression.

Yes, I know it may take a mental shift to think of the Book of Revelation as good news rather than doom, of hope rather than despair, of grace rather than judgment. Yet John’s vision is meant not to scare but to inspire.

Today’s passage comes as an interlude before the seventh seal is opened. When the people listening to John expect the worst, they are again reminded that no matter what they face, they are not alone, for God is with them. God has been, is and will always be with them. Therein lies their hope. For this life and for life eternal. God is with us.

Being a disciple of Jesus will not protect us from the harsh realities of life. Some believers will die because following Jesus is counter-cultural. Some believers will be persecuted and threatened to renounce their faith in Jesus, pressured from their leaders, their communities, and even their own families.

Yet even if we are not killed or persecuted for our faith, we will still have to deal with the ups and downs of life. Tragedies such as car accidents and shootings still happen in this world. People all over the world still struggle with the aftermath of natural disasters simply because of where they live. Many of us, as well as our loved ones, will have health issues.

Being a follower of Jesus does not protect us from the realities of this world. Rather, it reminds us that we are not alone, and along with other Christians, empowered by the Holy Spirit, we are called to transform the world around us into the kind of world God envisions for all humanity.

We are called to be people of hope, who live by resurrection faith.

..There's a modern cathedral in England that features one whole massive window pane made of clear glass. And etched into the glass are huge figures -- four feet wide and ten feet tall – of saints and angels. They're having a party – blowing trumpets and making merry and dancing across that massive span of glass.

Were that the only thing you saw when looking at that glass, you might justifiably conclude that there's something taunting and irrelevant and downright immoral about such fun going on in the heights of heaven while there are a host of us suffering here on earth. You might look at that glass and wonder what sort of God would have the nerve to throw a party like that in times like these, and what sort of church would have the nerve to go to it!

Yet the cathedral that features this etched glass is located in Coventry, which makes all the difference in the world. For, in November of 1940, Coventry suffered the longest air raid endured in any one night by any city in England during World War II. It was an air raid which killed and destroyed and reduced the whole city to ruins, including its cathedral.

When they built the new cathedral, they chose, as the purpose of its ministry, the theme of "resurrection through sacrifice."

So to look through that modern glass, beyond all the saints dancing in heaven, is then to see the painful ruins of the old bombed-out church.

The rubble of those ruins, that so aptly symbolized life in the middle of time, cannot be seen through that glass wall except in light of the promise from beyond time – the promise that God gathers up all of our flawed history, gathers it up into God's holy and redemptive purposes – and such a visual encounter with God's promise for the future permeates that pile of rubble with meaning that is not otherwise there.

-Theodore Wardlaw “Living in the Middle of Time” 9-21-97 day1.org adapted

In the midst of life, God is with us.

In the midst of struggle, God still yearns for a relationship with us.

In the midst of pain, God will dry our tears.

In the midst of death, God offers us eternal life.

Together we can trust that God is stronger than evil.

Together we can trust that nothing will separate us from the love of God.

Together we can trust that God is with us.

Together we can trust God’s promise of heaven for those who live by faith.

The vast multitude have washed their robes white in the blood of the Lamb.

As a youth or young adult, out on your own or learning to do laundry, have you ever tried to wash reds with whites? What happens? The whites become pink!

Yet Revelation promises us that the blood of Jesus, shed for us through his death on the cross, washes our robes, and our lives, white, pure, holy.

So these white robed children of God, men and women claimed as beloved sons and beloved daughters, have been saved by faith in Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. The white robes are symbols of redemption, symbols of forgiveness, symbols of new life.

This is why the multitude sings.

This is why we are called to sing.

To proclaim the good news that “Salvation belongs to our God and to the Lamb!”

To proclaim the good news of God’s victory over sin and death.

To proclaim the good news of God’s presence always with us.

In a moment we will proclaim this good news through sharing in the bread and cup of Holy Communion. We celebrate the mystery that the Lamb who was slain is also our good shepherd.

We celebrate the mystery that Jesus’ body and blood cleanses us from sin. We celebrate the mystery that through faith in Jesus we are brought back to a right relationship with God Almighty so that one day we, too, may stand among the multitude worshipping in heaven.

As you partake of the bread and cup of Holy Communion, I invite you to receive it as a gift of God’s love, a gift of God’s forgiving grace, a gift of our salvation, a gift of the promise of life eternal.

While we still will mourn this side of heaven, while we still will struggle at times with our faith,

God still invites us to lift our hearts and voices in the songs of the saints.

“Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving

and honor and power and might

be to our God forever and ever!”

This song is not about us, but about God. This song is not about our faith, but about God’s gift of saving grace. This song is not about what we do, but about who God was and is and always will be.

May we join our voices with the heavenly chorus and sing God’s song here and now and for all eternity. May it be so. Let us pray.