10/31-11/1-20 These Are They Rev. Amy Haines

Rev 7:9-17 All Saints Day

The Revelation of John is often perceived as an end time revelation of doom and gloom, of despair and judgment. Yet this vision was not written to scare us into faith, but to inspire us to stand firm in faith. We know the end of the story—God wins!

Today’s passage in the seventh chapter comes as an interlude before the seventh seal is opened. When the first hearers of this vision expected the worst, they were again reminded that no matter what they faced, they were not alone, for God was with them. They were encouraged to live by hope, for this life and for life eternal.

That same hope is offered to us today, those of us grappling with the struggles of 2020. God has not abandoned us. No matter what we face, God offers us the promise of God’s presence and the hope of eternal life.

Today, we glimpse a heavenly multitude lifting up their hands in praise, to our God who is faithful forever. Listen now and imagine that great multitude described in Revelation 7: 9-17.

In our United Methodist Book of Worship, I appreciate that a funeral service is titled a Service of Death and Resurrection. While we grieve the loss of our loved ones, we also are reminded of the promises of God found throughout Scripture. God loves us. God is with us. And God promises us life eternal through the resurrection of Jesus.

Today, our scripture offers us one glimpse of that eternal life, a great multitude gathered in worship.

Previous to today’s verses, John saw a crowd who numbered 144,000, faithful Israelites from each of the 12 tribes of Abraham. Yet in verse 9 the faithful in heaven have been expanded to a great multitude so large no one can count them all.

This 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.

Can you imagine who might be among this great multitude?

“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; African Christians gunned down in their villages by Muslim fanatics….”

-Martha Greene [in the Christian Century] as told by Barbara Bruneau revgalblogpals.org 10-31-17, adapted

French Catholics killed even this week.

Included in this heavenly gathering are those well known for their faith and those known only by a few. Included in this heavenly gathering are family members whose deaths we still grieve

and former church members who shared with us the joy of Jesus. Included in this heavenly gathering are those who were persecuted for their faith, as well as those who died of natural causes yet sought to live for Christ in the midst of their daily lives.

This multitude is truly the church of God, united! Beyond denomination and political affiliation.

Beyond the color of our skin and the language that we speak.

Together, they worship God Almighty.

“Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.” (v10)

Together, along with the angels, they sing their praise.

“Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!” (v12)

Observing such a great multitude of faithful believers, John was asked by one of the elders,

“Who are they? Where did they come from?”

John replied, “Sir, you know.”

Then the elder explained, “These are they who have come out of the great suffering; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.” (v14)

“These are they who have come through a great ordeal, who have borne witness to the goodness of God even as they struggled in their lives.”

--Derek Weber umcdiscipleship.org 11-1-20

These are they who had encountered hardship, suffering, ordeal, tribulation. Their suffering could have come from a specific event, or their hardship could be from the struggles of everyday life. They all suffered because they stood firm in faith.

Just because we believe in Jesus does not mean that we won’t struggle or suffer with illness or tragedy, with cancer or condemnation. Living for Jesus is counter-cultural. We are called to live above the division so evident in our world today. We are called to live caring for those others reject because they, too, are beloved of God. We are called to live faithful to Jesus’ ways as our ways, and in so doing, we will not always be welcome or understood.

The Greek often translated “These are they who have come out from…”

actually has a meaning of “These are they who are coming out from…”

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

The good news of this multitude is that it continues to grow with faithful believers each and every day! This multitude is composed of those who was, who are, and who will be. A great multitude who have lived and died having stood firm in their faith in Jesus!

“These are they who have come out of the great suffering; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.” (v14)

As a youth or young adult learning to do laundry, have you ever tried to wash reds with whites?

What happens? The whites become pink!

On this Halloween weekend, we are used to seeing images of blood and gore in horror films and CSI shows. We know that the stain of blood that is hard to remove.

Yet Revelation promises us that the blood of Jesus, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, washes our robes, and our lives, white, pure, holy, through his blood shed for us through his death on the cross. This is not the stuff of horror films, but a vivid symbol of the promise of God for new life.

Through our faith in Jesus’ death and resurrection, our sins are forgiven, repentance sets us on a new path, and we can rest in the assurance of God with us, for this life and for all eternity.

The white robes are symbols of redemption, symbols of forgiveness, symbols of new life.

“These are they who have come out of the great suffering; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.” (v14)

These are they, wearing white robes, who have put on Christ. Time and again in the letters of the New Testament, the apostle Paul invites believers to put on Christ. To put on the attributes of Christ. To put on the fruits of the Holy Spirit. To put on faith in Jesus.

When we put on Christ, we take his ways as our ways. We care as he cared. We love and he loved. We sacrifice as he sacrificed. We seek justice as he sought justice.

The only thing we cannot do is save ourselves. That still comes through our faith in Jesus.

These are they who have followed Jesus through every up and down of life. Beside the still waters and through the dark valleys. Through suffering and persecution, in worship and community, through tragedy and in celebration.

These are they who have joined in the suffering of others, caring for those around them as Jesus cared for all who surrounded him.

These are they who lived into their baptismal vows to renounce, reject and resist evil in whatever forms they present themselves.

These are they who are now part of the great cloud of witnesses, those who are present still with us today.

We celebrate all who are part of that great multitude today, because their faith encourages our faith. These are they, and they are us.

They remind us that as we worship, God dwells with us. They remind us that Jesus is still our Good Shepherd, leading us, guiding us, encouraging us to faith, hope, trust and love. They remind us to carry on the faith of Jesus, to pick up their mantel of faith and share Jesus with others.

Even among our grief. Even as a scattered church. Even as we struggle with hope. We are still called to live for Jesus.

No matter what happens this week with our presidential election; no matter what happens next year with our general conference; no matter what happens with COVID and cancer and tragedy; no matter what we have faced and what we have yet to face; we are called to join those who have gone before us and live for Jesus.

In a moment we will share in the bread and cup of Holy Communion, celebrating the mystery that the Lamb who was slain is also our good shepherd; celebrating the mystery that Jesus’ body and blood cleanses us from sin; celebrating 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.

Then, in response to such a gift, I invite you to go forth from this service giving thanks for God’s presence and promises, honoring the saints who have gone before us with faith and hope, with trust and worship, with sacrifice and service.

These are they, and they are us, and all are children of God offering praise to the One who sits on the throne. Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and always. Amen.