

Joining the Song

Revelation 7:9-17

The book of Revelation is one of the strangest in the Bible. It's full of fantastic pictures and descriptions. There are strange beasts and mysterious figures. There are all sorts of strange, large numbers. There are warnings to seven churches. When I first came to Memorial and was teaching a beginning Bible class to international students, the study included some passages from Revelation as we talked about the attributes of God. However, any attempt to talk about God's holiness using those passages usually were derailed by curiosity over what the angels with six wings and six eyes were all about.

But placed in amidst all of the weird stuff are some of the most familiar, comforting songs in the Bible. Every time we sing "This is the Feast" as we did this morning, we sing songs found in the book of Revelation, and join in singing praises with the chorus of angels and saints. We find the sources of songs that bring comfort in times of trouble. We find songs of hope in the face of challenges.

It's important to remember that apocalyptic books in the Bible, like Revelation, are not written to confuse. The Old Testament apocalyptic books, Daniel and Ezekiel, are written while the people of Israel are in exile. The book of Revelation is written towards the end of the first century, as the church faced persecutions and the transition to a new generation of leadership. They needed comfort, not confusion. Yet the prophets wrote these fantastical, frightening descriptions of what was happening and what was to come. But the writings are full of hope.

One of the more hopeful passages is what we hear today, as we do every year for All Saints' Day. We are shown a great multitude from every nation, tribe, people and language. We hear that great multitude singing praises around the throne of God. We hear the promises that they will not hunger or thirst anymore, and that God will wipe away every tear from their eyes. It's a beautiful, hopeful picture of what awaits us.

Benjamin Franklin once quipped that the only certain things are death and taxes. The Bible doesn't tell us much about taxes, except we have to pay them, but it talks a lot about death. Even more, though, it talks about how Jesus has defeated death.

And that's why the great multitude is wearing white robes. They're not just in robes because they're in a choir, singing praises to God. Their robes are white because of the blood of the Lamb, because of the redemptive work of Jesus on the cross. Because of the grace of God, they have been made clean. Because Jesus has defeated death, they can sing praises to God even after they've faced death. This picture of heaven shows us that God's grace, God's redemptive work, is not based on anything but the work of Jesus. We celebrate saints today not because what they did made them holy, but because what Jesus did made them holy.

And that picture of a choir singing gives us a hopeful picture of what awaits us, as well. Now, as Lutherans, many of us are spoiled and used to hearing great choirs, as we did last week for Reformation. We hear that as described in an excerpt from a short essay called "Singing with the Lutherans" by Garrison Keillor:

...Lutherans are bred from childhood to sing in four-part harmony. It's a talent that comes from sitting on the lap of someone singing alto or tenor or bass and hearing the harmonic intervals by putting your little head against that person's rib cage.

It's natural for Lutherans to sing in harmony. We're too modest to be soloists, too worldly to sing in unison. ... I once sang the bass line of Children of the Heavenly Father in a room with about three thousand Lutherans in it; and when we finished, we all had tears in our eyes, partly from the promise that God will not forsake us, partly from the proximity of all those lovely voices. By our joining in harmony, we somehow promise that we will not forsake each other. I do believe this: People, these Lutherans, who love to sing in four-part harmony, are the sort of people you could call up when you're in deep distress. If you're dying, they'll comfort you. If you're lonely, they'll talk to you. And if you're hungry, they'll give you tuna salad!

For the culmination of the Bible, for the final book in the New Testament, this passage from the book of Revelation gives us an amazing picture of what heaven will look like. It's a picture that we don't always get to

see here on earth. Here in Ames, and at Memorial, we get a little spoiled in seeing glimpses of that final picture. American and international students travel from all over the country and all over the world to study at Iowa State. They come to us. They come from different cultures and communities to learn skills and ideas that will help them throughout their lives and careers. And so we can have international students cooking downstairs, while college students study in the student center and the choir practices in the loft. And we can all gather together in worship, to praise the God who saved us. When the little children sang “Jesus loves the little children” we are blessed to be a church has children who are red, yellow, black and white. We can join together in prayer and praise, song and service.

Christianity includes people from all nations and tribes and languages. Each Sunday, we pray for Kebede and Workitu and their family in Ethiopia, the most Lutheran nation in the world. We pray for Carl and Kelsey Grulke in Botswana, working to translate the Bible into the heart language of a people group there. We pray for churches in Germany, where the churches are not filled with Germans, or even Europeans, but refugees from Iran and Turkey and elsewhere in the Middle East, hungry for God’s word and the message of God’s grace. As we pray for them, as we gather together here to hear God’s word and receive God’s forgiveness and gifts, we join with them across time and space, getting a glimpse of what awaits us.

That is the picture of heaven. That is what we are to think of when we go through our own times of trials and tribulations. Just as these ordinary people, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, are saved by the blood of Jesus and brought together in their common faith, so we, too, are saved by the blood of Jesus and brought together in our common faith. It is a source of great encouragement when we need to be encouraged. We are saints, not because of what we do, not in comparison to others, but because of what Jesus has done for us.

Singing in the great chorus of faith, we are one flock. Following our director, we go out and invite others into the choir, bringing back those who have drifted away, and continuing to make beautiful music. An American folk song reminds us that

*All God's critters got a place in the choir.
Some sing low, some sing higher*

*Some sing out loud on the telephone wire
And some just clap their hands, or paws or
anything they got.*

We all have a place in God's choir, listening to the voice of Jesus, our director, to sing the glory of God through our lives.

Pastor David Beagley
Memorial Lutheran Church and Student Center
All Saints Sunday (Observed)
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