

Sermon – November 1, 2020  
“God will wipe away every tear from their eyes”  
The Rev. John C. Wright

Text: Revelation 7:9-17

*Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come, visit, fill and anoint the sharing of these words. Make them to be a blessing for your people, a blessing that leads to life eternal and fruitful labor as we tarry here on this mission field. Lord, come and astonish us this morning with your word this day. Amen*

Today is All Saints' Day on the Christian calendar. It is a day that the church has set aside to remember and honor people God has placed in our lives who opened the door of faith for us. Those who opened this door may have been a friend in your neighborhood that helped connect you to Christ. They may have been a Sunday School teacher, parent, grandparent, aunt, uncle, or someone you worked with or met in the military or other service. They come from all walks of life and have touched our lives with the love of God. This is the day we honor the impact their lives had on us. Our United Methodist Communion liturgy reminds us of our connection with these saints of the earth and saints that have gone on to glory with the words, "... and so with your people on earth and all the company in heaven, we praise in their unending hymn ..." Listen for those words as we celebrate Communion later in the service and let those words remind you of the saints in our lives. We will talk more about the unending hymn in a moment, but for now let's take a few minutes and remember those who sowed the seeds of faith in our lives. Let's enter into a time of prayer and thanksgiving for the saints in our lives. I will open a time of prayer and then ask you to speak the name of saints in your life that you would like to have remembered *Prayer: Lord, we celebrate saints from the distant past, founding church mothers and fathers and defenders of the faith throughout the centuries, alongside those saints who have taught us to pray, shared with us their insights into scripture, and walked beside us as we have grown in our faith, and those who have worked with us in your mission, cared for us in our times of need, celebrated our joys, and helped lift the weight of our sorrows. Lord, we remember those who planted the seeds of faith into our lives. Come, Holy Spirit, and bring to mind those who loved us as Christ loves. Amen.*

Revelation is a book in the Bible that gets a great deal of focus on and speculation about its end-time prophecy. We often get so wrapped up in this idea of the end of the world and trying to figure out when that will occur, or if it is occurring now, that we miss much of the rich message contained in this book of the Bible. Revelation also has a glimpse of heaven, given to John in a vision, which he attempts to share with us by including a description of what he sees in his vision. Let's look at John's vision of heaven for a few moments this morning and see what we can learn about heaven. As a bit of background, we need to remember that John has been swept into a vision of heaven. He has witnessed the throne room of God, the opening of the seven seals, and the seven woes that come upon the earth with their opening, and the coming impact the woes will have on the people of the earth. He has witnessed the 144,000 in heaven who are from the tribes of Israel, and now he again looks into the throne room of God and witnesses other aspects of heaven. When Jesus was teaching his disciples, he taught about the kingdom of God, the kingdom that is now but not yet. John's vision gives us a glimpse into the full arrival of the kingdom of God. From Jesus' teaching, we learn the attributes of people who will be welcomed into the kingdom of God: those who repent, believe in Jesus, seek to produce fruit for the kingdom, love God, and love their neighbor. Now John is given other aspects of heaven to behold and to share. Let's see what we can capture from John's description of heaven found in our reading this day. We will do well to keep in mind that there are limitations to John's use of language to describe what he sees. John is seeking to use words that he understands that describe things he knows to now describe things he does not know but is seeing in the vision, the things of heaven.

John starts his description with the words, "I looked." This gives us the idea that he is seeing something different, some new aspect of heaven that he has not written about thus far in his writing. What he sees first is the great multitude, a multitude so vast it cannot be numbered. This description reminds us of the sands of the seashore that are in the covenant promises of God and of the dust of the earth that is also used in the Bible to describe the number of those in the kingdom of God. This is a vast crowd, a great multitude, the complete number of all who will be found in the kingdom of God. We should keep in mind that John writes at a time when the numbers of Christians in the world were small and could easily be counted. This vast multitude would and does bring great encouragement to John and all who read Revelation for the numbers of believers who will be found in heaven; it is a multitude beyond our ability to number. I also

will point out that John does not recognize any of the people he sees in the multitude. He does not point out a parent, relative, brother, or friend. What he does point out is the diversity of those who make up the multitude. He describes the multitude as consisting of people from every nation, tribe, people, and language. One of the points here is that in heaven all of the diversity of creation is represented in large numbers. All of the people of the earth are represented. All of the diversity of God's creation is present, embraced, and included.

Yet this diverse multitude is unified in their stand together before the throne of God. They are all dressed in white robes and are holding palm branches. They have one cry, "Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!" While they are diverse in their place in God's creation and their individual attributes, they are unified through Christ to God. Their cry for salvation recognizes that they are not worthy to be present in heaven, but that it is through God's grace, God's action through his only son Jesus Christ, that they are included in heaven. They do not sing; they cry out in recognition of the gift they have received, salvation. This is the joyous cry of those once separated from God, but now included in the vast number who recognized Jesus as the sacrifice that allowed them to be included, to gain entry into the presence of God. We find later in the vision that the white robes they wear are washed white by the blood of the Lamb. This is not what we think would occur for the washing of a robe in blood. They are not stained by the blood, but are washed clean by Jesus' shed blood. The white robes represent the removal of sins and the restoration of a right relationship with God, made possible by God through the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. Their joy is the recognition of the salvation they have received. The palm branches they hold remind us of Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem, but here represent Jesus' triumph over death and sin and their inclusion in that victory.

The focus of John's looking moves from the multitude to another group present in the throne room of heaven, the elders, four living creatures, and all the angels. The angels are no longer going to and fro over the earth as messengers and protectors, but are now all assembled before God. We are not sure who the elders are and there are many thoughts as to their identity. Some think they are the patriarchs and the twelve disciples, others that they are high ranking angels. Who they are is not clear, just that they are present, and when one talks to John, who is an apostle, John uses a title of respect as he addresses him. This group, when the cries of joy for salvation are heard, fall to the ground and worship God. This is the group that is singing in

heaven while the multitude cries out. They sing a seven-fold praise of God, “Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.” They are praising the attributes of God, the number seven being the perfect number of God’s attributes. This is the never-ending hymn heard in John’s description of the throne room of heaven, the place where God is on the throne and the Lamb is before the multitude.

We do need to be careful what we take away from John’s vision and his attempt to put it into words for us, but we can realize that heaven is a place filled with people and the continuous praise of God. If you don’t like people and don’t like to praise, then you are going to be very uncomfortable in heaven. That is what is going on. The focus is on worship of God and the Lamb. Before COVID, when we could sing in worship, we seemed to struggle to sing all the verses of a hymn with joy, and yet when we get to heaven, we will encounter never-ending praise. Perhaps this temporary hold on singing will allow us to find new joy when we once again can lift our voices together in praise of God. We might want to learn now to praise God with joy and to cry out in joyful thanks for the salvation we have received as we prepare for eternity in the kingdom of God.

John’s focus in the vision changes for the third time. Now he begins to tell us why there is such praise and joy in heaven. He gives us insight into why the multitude is gathered before the throne of God. God is now sheltering them. John’s words tell us that those among the multitude will hunger and thirst no more. There will be no physical needs in heaven and, more importantly, our spiritual hunger and thirst for God will be satisfied. No longer will we be seeking God, but we will be restored to the presence of God. There will be no burning rays of the sun or unbearable heat in heaven. God will be our shelter there. Notice that “the Lamb” will be at the center of the throne as the shepherd. Jesus will be there to lead us to the springs of the water of life. We will be filled to overflowing with the living water that Jesus gives without measure. We will be truly alive. Finally, in heaven God will wipe away every tear from our eyes. Pain is gone, sins are gone, brokenness is healed by God, sorrow and suffering are gone. In heaven there is only the abundance of living water and the Lamb to shepherd us and guide us into the springs of the water of life, true life, everlasting life, never-ending life that brings us to cries of joy for our salvation and praises to God for his steadfast love for us. God will wipe away the tears that have been found in our eyes. We will be restored, renewed, filled with the love of

God to such a degree that we will not even recall our brokenness, hurt, pain, and sorrows. That is an aspect of heaven that we should be focused on as we look towards eternity reconciled to God through the son in the Holy Spirit.

There are a number of ideas that we can take away from this morning's scripture that we should grasp, but let me point out a few. First, the saints of the church are in heaven. In the vast multitude that John describes as having members from every nation, tribe, people, and language stand saints who have blessed our lives. There we will find the parent, grandparent, spouse, uncle, aunt, friends, and coworkers who lived a life filled with the Holy Spirit that allowed us to catch a glimpse of Christ and to be drawn into a relationship with Jesus. They have cooked meals for sharing, run yard sales, held bake sales, repaired homes, taught Bible studies, written notes of encouragement, prayed with us, sat with us, and loved us as Christ loves us. They have wiped tears from our eyes, fed us when we were hungry, given us drink when we thirsted, and protected us as they could. They are beggars who found lasting food for their souls and shared with us where to get it for ourselves. These are the saints in our lives that we remember especially on this day and on many days throughout the years. These are the saints of the church who went before us, some of whom we mentioned earlier in prayer, and we honor them this day and yearn to join with them in the vast multitude that cries out in joy for salvation before the throne of God and hears the never-ending hymn sung by angels.

There are also saints who are still with us today. They have not yet completed their earthly journey and are still among us working to lead us and encourage us into new, renewed, or deeper relationship with Christ. They are here and we know their names as family, friends, and co-laborers in the kingdom of God.

In heaven we will hear firsthand the never-ending hymn of praise sung by the angels. This is not our favorite style of music we have enjoyed here on earth but the sounds of angel voices praising God. Our hearts should yearn to hear their voices raised to praise God. We should be excited to again raise our voice in praise wherever we are for as long as we are able.

John does not mention anyone he recognizes in the multitude he sees around the throne in the vision. They may have all been people yet to have been born who will come to know Christ and will be shepherded by Jesus. Yet this diverse multitude cries out in unity for the unifying salvation they have received. They are in heaven before God and the Lamb. If you saw this vision, would you recognize anyone there? John only mentions Jesus as one he recognizes. I

have been told that when we get to heaven, we will be surprised by two things, who is there whom we did not expect and who is not there whom we did expect. So, we ask ourselves, how do we get to be in that number? The answer is we surrender to the Holy Spirit's action in our lives and recognize that we are all sinners and in our own strength and striving cannot arrive in heaven. But we can allow our hearts to be convicted of our sins, repent of those sins, accept Jesus Christ as our Lord and savior, and believe that he will be our shepherd. Let me encourage anyone who has never accepted Jesus as your savior to do so today, this hour, before it is too late. Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ as your savior, one who died to be able to forgive our sins and let us be restored to God through his death and resurrection. Then go out into this community loving God and loving others. Seek to be like Christ and to be one who serves, encourages, and loves others as God loves us. A few minutes ago, many of us mentioned a saint from our past whom we chose to remember this day. Seek to so live your life that when you have left your earthly journey, you are one who is remembered as a saint of this church. Become one who is producing the fruit of the kingdom of God, right here, right now.

*Pray with Me: Father I thank you for those who have gone on before and loved us while they were among us. Lord, we praise you for the saints you placed in our lives. Jesus, I surrender my life to you. Remake me and mold me to be like you so that I might be one who is at work producing the fruits of the kingdom of God, right here, right now among those who do not know you. Amen.*