

November 6- All Saints Sunday-
St. John's Vision of Heaven Revelation 7:9-14

This Sunday we celebrate All Saints' Day, that festival when we give God thanks for the saints who have walked the way of faith before us. Today's lesson from Revelation, the last book of the Bible, speaks of heaven -- a great multitude so large that no one could count them. They are those who, having sung God's songs on earth in their lifetimes, now sing that song before the throne of God. When asked, "*Who are these?*" John is told that they are the ones who kept believing and hoping, witnessing and giving, even when the going got rough. Now they are in the presence of the great shepherd who wipes away all tears and guides them to the waters of eternal life.

Note that these saints, robed in white, are in a great procession, a great parade moving around the throne of God. You and I today are at the end of that long, procession. The saints are those who walk before us, those who show us the way.

I would not be here today if it were not for all those saints who put up with me in Sunday school and told me the stories of Jesus, who taught me in a college religion class, and guided me when I was confused, and put their arm around me when I wanted to give up. I'm thinking of a multitude that I could not possibly name today. I expect that you could also think about the people who nurtured you in this faith and to whom you owe your commitment to Christ.

Today is the day we give thanks for these saints, all of them, and acknowledge our indebtedness to them. In prayer, name them, claim them, give thanks to God that they were there for you.

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As a way of remembering, some of us put pictures of departed loved ones on the tables in the narthex. In some parts of Mexico, on the Day of the Dead they gather in a cemetery to remember. They elaborately decorate the tombstones, strewing flowers all over the ground. They bring food; the children run; they sing and play games; it is a great festivity, all done with tender care. "*It was a great comfort to see this attention lavished on the dead. In these families you would never stop being loved.*" Celebrating at gravesite so they were near their brothers and sisters who had died and gone to be with God.

There is an old Texas tale set in a cemetery. In a hotly contested race for the United States Senate in 1948, supporters of Lyndon Baines Johnson found support from some new voters -- who were dead.

Johnson and a handful of his campaign aides were out one night, fraudulently registering voters in a cemetery, when one worker came upon one tombstone, the letters worn over, moss grown up over the marker. Skipping it to move on, he was upbraided by the leader of the expedition: "*No, no, go back and register that person. He has as much right to vote as anybody else in this cemetery.*"

We Christians oddly believe that the dead have as much right to vote in church as the living. We believe in *the Communion of Saints*. Whenever we sing a hymn, read from scripture, even pray, we are doing so with the saints. We are dependent on those who

have gone before us to give us the words, tell us the stories, and teach us the tunes whereby we praise God, grow in our faith, and find the way that leads to God.

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Many laypeople think about the subject of heaven more often than we preachers speak of it. Taken as a whole, the Bible does not speak about heaven that often. Maybe the biblical writers find it difficult to envision and describe the, as yet, invisible, to speak of that which we have not yet experienced. But that problem doesn't stop authors from writing books about heaven. There was "*My 90 Minutes in Heaven*" and more recently "*Heaven is Real*" -- #1 on Times best seller list.

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A few months ago I had cataract surgery. Before I went into the operating room, the anesthesiologist explained that the drug he was giving me would put in a "twilight" state. I'd be awake but wouldn't feel anything and wouldn't remember the surgery.

Lying on the bed in recovery after the surgery, I realized I had a card in my hand. It was the anesthesiologist's business card and on the back was written "Heaven is real".

Then I did remember something about the surgery. Before the surgeon began, the anesthesiologist started talking to him about a book he had read – "*Heaven is real*". So I started to tell them about Rob Bell's book "*Love Wins – A book about heaven & hell*". The surgeon told me "*When you talk, your eyes move, and I can't work. So shut up and be quiet.*"

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In thinking about heaven, it seems to me that getting down to specifics, the particular appearance and furnishings of heaven are beside the point. The scriptural witness is too varied and rich for us to say exactly heaven looks like this.

Rather the Bible uses metaphors. A metaphor keeps opening up meaning to us, keeps unfolding itself before us, takes us somewhere, gives us some vision which we could not have had on the basis of our meager experience. Heaven is like that. It is truth beyond language, something like quantum physics.

When Paul gets into descriptions of "what next?" or the afterlife, he tells the Corinthians that he is going to tell them, not a definition, or even a story, but "*a mystery*." Paul thereby means something that is unfathomable.

"No eye has seen, nor ear heard," says Paul, "what God has prepared for those who love him" 1 Cor. 2:9.

So when the Bible tries to speak of heaven, it reaches for the language of the great delights we know on earth, saying heaven is sort of like - a great banquet -- the great, communal, joyful sharing. Or it's like a great crescendo of song when all those who have been silenced by the tears of life shall sing – or like being welcomed home, being embraced by the beloved.

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Our lesson from Revelation chapter 7 is a strong, vivid affirmation that in the end, at the end, God shall have his way with the world. The world, created and loved by God, but constantly in rebellion against God, shall at last be God's. Christ, the Lamb once slain, shall at last rule and his rule shall know no end.

Revelation paints a picture of God's victory in Jesus Christ, that place, that time, when "*the dwelling of God will be with humanity*". That's what Christian talk of heaven is about

- God's victory in Jesus Christ when God's loving purposes will at last be accomplished for ever and ever.

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Yearning for a concrete, specific view of heaven is bound to be frustrating. If heaven is the completion of the world as God intends it, if heaven is the fulfillment of the highest and best, the triumph of God's love, we earthbound, finite creatures will have difficulty grasping it, even if God tried to tell us in one-syllable words.

Heaven is that larger, or deeper, or higher reality that underlies physical existence.

"For Christians, heaven is where Christ is...being in heaven is being in the presence of Christ". Our ego, so anxiously seeking the fulfillment of its desires, is at last overwhelmed by having its true desire met in Christ. This is not the obliteration of the self, but the fullest realization of our true selves.

There, at the end, God takes us, welcomes us home.

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Will we know there, those whom we have known and loved here?

Paul assures us that *when we were baptized, we were united with Christ in a death like His.* And if we have been united to Christ, *we certainly shall be untied with Him in a resurrection like His.*

Romans 6:3-5

When Jesus was resurrected, though he had mightily changed, his disciples, with just a bit of coaxing, knew for sure it was Jesus. Odd that we should wonder if we will know other people in heaven whom we know on earth, since heaven is that existence when we shall all be most truly who we have been meant to be. We shall all be the most recognizable as ourselves as we have ever been.

I will be that person whom God intended me to be; I will at last be who I am.

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Finally, Heaven is whatever God wants it to be. Heaven is our being whomever God wants us to be. Forever.

How do you get to heaven?

Remember last week's sermon?

By faith alone.

Faith - simply trusting Christ and His promises.

Believing His promise is true for me too.

Jesus' words of promise --

The word he speaks to each one of us

"I am the resurrection and the life

He who believes in me,

even though he die, yet shall he live

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*May the God of hope fill you with all joy and
peace in believing, so that you may
abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.*

Romans 15:13

