

Paradise Restored

Revelation 7:9-17

All Saints Day

November 1, 2020

Pastor Bill Mosley

"There is a non-profit organization in Fort Worth, Texas called The W.A.R.M. (What About Remembering Me) Place that regularly helps bring forth new life out of death. This is a place for children aged 3-18 who are grieving the death of someone close to them."

At the WARM Place Pastor Candi Vernon led groups for 3-4 year olds, and 8-12 year olds.

She says, "Death is very difficult for children to deal with because (1) children grieve differently than adults, and also differently depending on their stage of development and (2) because many people think kids are young and resilient and will just 'get over it.'"

"Many times people asked me how I could work with all of these grieving children (especially the 3 and 4 year olds.) My response was always, "How can I not?" Death/grief is a frightening thing to experience and no one, particularly a child, should have to go through it alone. Besides, I get to watch them get better and go on with their lives. The truth is, you never 'get over it,' but you can learn to work through it and learn to live again yourself."

Death is in everyone's life, & it means we've lost the paradise God made for us in Eden, by going against God's will. But by his grace, God restores the paradise.

In the last book of the Bible, John the elder has a great vision of the earth ending in subjection to God's will. Before the terrible day of the Lord's anger, the servants of God are sealed on their foreheads as a mark of their salvation. Theirs is the hope of paradise restored.

What John is saying is: 1. We are lost from Paradise 2. which is restored by God through the Lamb. 3. The multitude praises God 4. And is comforted by the Lamb.

Martin Luther struggled with this idea. He wanted to know righteousness. He tried everything he could to put himself right with God. Then he came across a phrase of Paul's, in Romans, "the righteousness of God." And that phrase started the Reformation. **We** have no righteousness. It must come from **God**. And the righteousness of God is to give us and all his children salvation. It is a gift of grace.

We are lost from Paradise which is restored by God through the Lamb. And the multitude praises God.

John shows us that every part of creation, living or not, praises God in heaven. God is the God of the living, in this world & the next. & what we do here, while living in this world, shapes us for the next. Get the most out of this life & you'll get the most out of the next. & you get the most by thanking & praising God, & sharing his love for the world.

Look there at the reading for today. Find the praise given to God in verse 12, and count the praises he is given: "Blessing & glory & wisdom & thanksgiving & honor & power & might be to our God for ever & ever! Amen."

Seven praises. The number 7 stands for completeness, wholeness. Our ELCA hymnal includes this song of praise, and we sing it frequently.

But what of this multitude? John says that first he sees a crowd of 144,000; 12,000 for each of the 12 tribes of Israel. Some have claimed that this is the total number of spaces there are in heaven, & if you don't have one of the 144,000 tickets, you're out of luck.

This is the trap of proof texting, that is, staking everything on one verse taken out of context.

BTW, more Americans have died of Covid 19 than these supposed reserved seats in Heaven.

But John doesn't stop -- God doesn't stop -- with any number, or any country, or even the chosen nation of Israel. This multitude no one could count, from every

nation, from all tribes and people and tongues, and he even takes a breath and looks around to see if he missed anybody, all these folks in white robes that have been cleansed by the blood of the Lamb. Not cleansed by anything they have done. It's a gift of grace.

The elder, or "interpreting angel", asks John who are these? And he answers his own question. **These are they who have come out of the Great Ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them clean in the blood of the Lamb.**

You don't pay much attention to ordinary, commonplace images you see every day. You get jaded.

And here is one that is strikingly contradictory, but we have heard it so often that we don't even think of it. Robes washed clean and white in blood?. I don't know anything about lamb's blood, but I do know that it's hard to get red bloodstains out of anything white.

And how about the striking contradiction that these people, who have been through great ordeal, are joyously praising and serving God in Christ?

Now, there are great catastrophes & sufferings yet to come in this book, so what is this ordeal that the multitude has come out of really?

John is writing to a church under persecution, probably the persecution of the Emperor Domitian Caesar, who was assassinated in 97 AD, so we are experiencing a message given around 95 or 96 AD. John wants us to know that Christians who face the lions and the fires, whether they survive or not, will see paradise at the throne of God and the Lamb. They won't hunger or thirst, they'll have springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear. Not that they won't have tears, but they will be comforted.

We don't face lions or fires. Yet this scripture has survived 19 centuries to speak to us. "The Ordeal" is probably not lions or fires, but what could it mean for us? It could mean the end of time. Some believe that John is predicting a time of terrible disaster before the final reign of God. But that still doesn't fit; the multitude is before the throne prior to these later ordeals.

This ordeal is one everyone goes through. A universal ordeal would apply to everyone, and everyone would need encouragement and comforting in the face of it. And what ordeal does everyone go through, regardless of time on this earth? Life itself. Life is not a terrible suffering, but everyone has hurts and sorrows and pains, what we used to call, "a cross to bear." **Everyone experiences the pain of life. Everyone encounters death -- walking through the valley of the shadow. And everyone dies. But everyone experiences joys and pleasures, too. It's how God reminds us he is with us all the time.**

Notice that the multitude praising God & the Lamb are praising God & the Lamb, even after coming out of the great ordeal. The message of Revelation is: "Praise God, anyway. No matter what." We praise God for his love & grace for God so loved the world, a multitude that no one can count, that includes everyone, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life. Celebrate salvation! Rejoice in your baptism!

For we know that God provides a warm place, for thousands of millions, and the number is uncounted. And that warm place is the joy of living in God's grace.

Lord, help us to know the joy that is ours when we say no to everything that makes it more difficult to say yes to you.