



Westminster Presbyterian Church
Knoxville, TN
Nov. 5, 2023
The Rev. Dr. Richard Coble
Sermon: "For All the Saints"

Revelation 7:9-17 (NRSV)

7:9 After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands.

7:10 They cried out in a loud voice, saying, "Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!"

7:11 And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God,

7:12 singing, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen."

7:13 Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?"

7:14 I said to him, "Sir, you are the one that knows." Then he said to me, "These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

7:15 For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them.

7:16 They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat;

7:17 for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

“For All the Saints”

The elder turned to John of Patmos in the midst of his vision of the heavenly multitude from every tribe, people, and language, and asked a question, “Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?” John, of course, didn’t know his guide’s question, so the elder answered for him.

I found this golden cross, tucked away in a box that I hadn’t opened in years in the back of my office this summer, as I was packing up my things to move to Westminster.

It was a gift from a former supervisor. The Rev. Max Patterson served as pastor of First Baptist Church of Stantonsburg, NC for over 30 years until his death in the early 2010s. When I was a college student and still a Baptist, the North Carolina Baptist State Convention placed me as a summer youth minister at FBC Stantonsburg, the smallest, small town I had ever seen. It had a Chinese restaurant, a Piggly Wiggly, one stoplight and two churches. The Methodists were right across the street from the Baptists.

I ended up working with Max for 4 years, all through college and then the year after college. He was one of the first people to teach me how to be a minister. As introverted as I am, Max was extraverted. We would sit in his office, and he would just talk, and talk, and talk, literally for hours. He could have made friends with a brick wall. Max was a good preacher, but I don’t remember a thing about his sermons. He was a decent administrator, but from what I could tell he let the board choose the overall direction of the church. What I learned from Max was that relationship is the crux of ministry.

His office was always open. One night, I don’t remember why I needed to go to the church so late, like 10:00 on a Saturday night, and I found Max, clearly right in the middle of writing his sermon for the morning. And he didn’t shrug me off. If he was feeling stressed, he didn’t show it. We sat down. We talked for an hour. I kept thinking, I should really leave so he can get to work, but Max was never in a hurry.

The greatest gift he ever gave was his time. He always had time to spare for you. As much as he loved the sound of his own voice, he loved being with people even more. He always made you feel like you were worth attention and time and care. I wish I could still talk with him today.

“Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?”

Much has been made of the symbolism of Revelation. Misguided religious personalities and tv studios seek to read contemporary life into its prophecies, wondering when ‘the great ordeal’ will be upon us.

In reality, the overwhelming consensus among Biblical scholars is that the Book of Revelation was written in protest of Roman occupation and the mandatory Roman religious practices forced upon the early Church in the 1st and 2nd centuries.

In those days, in Roman cities, no matter your religion you were expected to sacrifice to the Roman city gods. It was a civic duty and a community-building practice, as much as it was a show of loyalty to the Roman state. John urges his readers not to participate, however; to show devotion to Christ alone. In doing so, he anticipates that they will be persecuted for their refusal:

Do not fear what you are about to suffer, he says, Beware, the devil (meaning Rome) is about to throw some of you into prison so that you may be tested...Be faithful until death, and [God] will give you the crown of life. Ch. 2 vs. 10.

Throughout, the Book of Revelation symbolizes Rome as the incarnation of evil: the beast, the antichrist, and looks to a day when God will come upon earth. With these brilliant images throughout the book, John is arguing that God is worthy of his readers’ trust. Because it is God, and not Caesar, who is Lord:

These are they who have come out of the great ordeal...They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, no any scorching heat; for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.

But wait, you may be asking, if the great ordeal (the NIV translation uses the more familiar term: “the great tribulation”) – If that is about an argument that the church had with Rome some 2,000 years ago, what relevance do these images have for my life?

After all, the Church outlasted Rome, and no other religion claims my allegiance in the way the Roman gods once did for the early Christians. In fact, the great majority of leaders in my country call themselves Christian and church steeples can be seen wherever you look up in Knoxville (except of course here, because Westminster wanted to be different). In the privilege of being a member of the

dominant religion in this country that boasts a separation of church and state, I no longer face the pressures of John's original readers; their great ordeal is not mine.

Or better yet, if I now, and if we today, hold the power and privilege of our time, might the symbol be reversed? Instead of bowing down to Rome, is there even the possibility of becoming Rome, the oppressors instead of the oppressed?

After all, the late author Rachel Held Evans coined the term 'Christian Persecution Complex'¹ to name the ways certain Christians imagine themselves persecuted simply by sharing public space with those of differing faiths, family constellations, gender or sexual orientations. In reality, it is the church that holds far more power and privilege than these minority groups. And it is Christians, not Rome, who use their power even to oppress religious and other minorities, like taking certain books out of libraries, lobbying against gay marriage, making public condemnations of Islam and Judaism.

When the church is more likely to cause the great tribulation rather than undergo it, what does Revelation say to us today? Could even the beloved image of the choir be outdated? Could it ever still be an option?

At the end of Max's life, I was working as a hospital chaplain in Philadelphia, fresh out of seminary, while Max was still working as a pastor in Stantonsburg, a post he held through the end of his life. In the spring of 2011, his colon cancer, which had been in remission for a long time, reappeared quickly and his kidneys started shutting down. He was on hospice for about a week.

We talked on the phone one final time. The day after the call, my chaplain supervisor, always acting as a supervisor, asked me if I had talked to Max about his faith while he was on hospice.

Of course, I didn't ask him about his faith. I didn't even think about it. But ever since then, when I've talked with someone on hospice or facing a great illness, I've always asked.

I had that opportunity recently, in one of my last visits with a member of my last church. A man was on hospice. I didn't know him well. Still a member of the

¹ Rachel Held Evans, "For the Sake of the Gospel, Drop the Persecution Complex," July 15, 2015. <https://rachelheldevans.com/blog/persecution-complex>.

church, he'd attended only sporadically for years. This was our first real conversation.

I asked him, 'Is your faith helping you through this time?'

Every time I ask it, the question is anything but routine. I hold great admiration for anyone facing the end. I want to know how they do it. I want to know if this, all this, all that I've spent my life searching for, faith and meaning and redemption, does any of it really make a difference? Does any of it hold up, in the end?

This man didn't give me a perfunctory answer. He didn't say 'yes.' He said, 'I hope so. I hope that I've been a good man. I hope that I'm leaving something good behind. I hope that God is going to welcome me.'

I love that answer. It was so raw, so honest, so genuine.

We are at quite a distance from John's original readers, but one thing that we have in common: we are still asked to trust in God with our lives. It is that trust that empowered our ancestors of the faith to stand up to the powers and principalities of Rome.

And even, and especially, when the reverse is true, when the temptation no longer is to bow down to Roman gods but rather the temptation is to make idols of our own power and privilege at the expense of others, we are called instead to trust, that love is greater than fear, that Christ and not power over others will be our salvation.

But this trust also goes deeper and is more subtle than these two extremes. In between them, is an everyday trust, not as grand as that great tribulation. It is a trust we are called to have, in the smaller ordeals faced every day. The Saints don't all go by such grand names like John of Patmos, Paul of Tarsus, or Mary the Mother of Jesus. There is an everydayness to the saints, an ordinary-ness to them.

Every day that we have to choose whether we will care for or ignore the least of these, the child alone at the lunch table, the man begging in the street, the work colleague having a rough day, the teenager whose love language is rebellion, the elderly parent who refuses to acknowledge their limitations, we are called to trust in the love of God through our actions.

And every day when we face our own mortal bodies and circumscribed lives, a new diagnosis, a rapid change in circumstances or relationship, even in the face of death itself, the call remains the same, to trust in the love of God to carry us through.

It doesn't have to be perfect. Notice what the elder tells John when he answers his own rhetorical question:

These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. For this reason they are before the throne of God.

John's church faces the great ordeal. But ultimately, it is not their actions that make them worthy to be in the choir, it is the grace of Christ: *For this reason they are before the throne of God.*

The elder asked John a question: "Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?"

We found our answer here, at this Table. When we come to this table, we join the Saints, near and far, those who witnessed in their lives to the love, grace, and trustworthiness of God. We carry their faithfulness with us, as their examples live on in our lives of faith today. And one day, when we join that choir in the sweet by and by, our witness in faith also, will be joined to and carried on by those we have cared for in this life.

At this table, generations of faithfulness come together, imperfect and ordinary as we are. This table binds it all together, binds us all together, to the perfect love and grace of God.

"Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?"
It's the saints. It's all the saints.

Amen.