

“God Will Wipe Away Every Tear”

Revelation 7:9-17

If you can, try to remember how you felt when you heard the news about each of the following events:

- The massacre of 12 students and a teacher at Columbine High School in Colorado by two students in April of 1999.
- The killing of five young girls and the wounding of five others in an Amish School by a lone gunman in Pennsylvania in October 2006.
- The slaying of 32 students and teachers at Virginia Tech by a deranged student in April of 2007.
- The killing of three women and the wounding of nine others by a lone gunman at a fitness center near Pittsburgh while Alan Hamula and I were staying in a nearby hotel for Stephen Ministry Leadership training last August.
- The murder of 13 soldiers on the grounds of Fort Hood in Texas last November.

If you're like most people, you experienced a sense of deep shock and dismay on hearing the news of the first of those events. But unless you were personally connected to a victim of one of the later tragedies, it's likely that each one had progressively less emotional impact on you. By the time the last of these was reported, your reaction may have been little more than a

sad shake of the head and a weary utterance of, “Oh, no. Not again.” And you probably turned your attention away from the news much more quickly than you did after Columbine.

That isn’t surprising. We lived through 9/11. We frequently hear body counts from Iraq and Afghanistan. By way of television and the internet, we’ve witnessed such awful stuff like the murders of the women in East Cleveland that our shock threshold has been raised. Our reactions are more subdued and controlled.

Following the Virginia Tech shootings, columnist Daniel Henninger, writing in the Wall Street Journal, commented on this growing numbness to bad news. He said that “it may be that as a nation we’ve reached tilt with tragedy, ‘Tilt’ is the famous metaphor drawn from the old pinball machines, which shut down if you banged on them too hard or tilted them. Pinballs could survive plenty of random shocks to the system. But there were limits. Of late, we have been banged on hard.”

Later in that same column, he wrote, “Our capacity for shock at genuine violence has been recalibrated.”

I don’t think our lessened reaction has anything to do with not caring or a lack of empathy. It’s that we have a survival function that causes us to become protective of our emotional energy. We cannot continue to dump out our emotional energy day after day on extreme events and have any left for our daily living.

And so a kind of numbness creeps in, and to some degree, it needs to. It’s a defense

mechanism that keeps us from reaching our personal tilt point.

But I see that numbness making some of us very pessimistic when we think that no matter how much we've organized our lives, the forces of chaos and destruction will ultimately prevail. No matter how much we think we are in control of our lives, something will happen that will set us spinning backwards. We prepare ourselves for the worst case scenario so that if the worst happen, our reaction can be subdued and controlled. We become "comfortably numb" to the chaos and violence in the world around us. There is only "bad news."

Against all that bad news, there's the vision that John of Patmos had of the eternal age to come, where a multitude of people – so great it cannot be counted – with representatives from every nation, tribe, peoples and language, stand worshiping before the throne of the Lamb of God.

And they cry out "good news": Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!" When John seeks to know who these people of this multitude are, he is told, "These are they who come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb."

In the historical context of John's first century, "the great ordeal" refers to the persecution of Christians by both the Romans and the Jews. We aren't being persecuted, but we could describe our 21st century as the "great ordeal." In contrast to the pessimism of the first century "great ordeal," this Revelation passage sees the brightness and good news

beyond it.

These people who have come through the first century “great ordeal” faithfully, “will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor 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.” They are the ones who were numbed by the lettering of bad news in their day, but in the new creation, they are “un-numbed”. In fact, they have no need for defensive numbing, because “God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

But what about us? If visions from Revelation are going to fit into our existence somewhere, it has to be read as belonging to some future that we can only, like John, envision. And we’re most likely going to see this vision when like the multitude in Revelation – we are gathered around the throne of God in worship together. John’s vision shows us that in our worship together, we know that the Lamb is our shepherd.

We know that when we worship together on this side of eternity in this holy space, that He is our Shepherd in this time and place too. The Shepherd never leaves now and in eternity. Worshiping together brings us that assurance of God’s presence and can give us a glimpse into eternity. We don’t come here for private devotions but as part of a worshiping congregation, singing praises together, listening together, sharing together, communing together.

Following the Virginia Tech shootings, the university reacted by holding a convocation, by creating a space for people to come together to talk about God. Fox news religion

correspondent Lauren Green wrote, “So where is God? He is in the prayer vigils. He is in the rivers of tears flowing from everyone affected. He is in the community coming together to offer support to the families. He is at work in the love and strength people are offering each other. God is with us.”

Those are words of hope that come from her experiencing people coming together before God who share the same hope for the future. We maintain that hope even when soul numbing bad news is all around us. That hope is strengthened everytime we commune and worship together.

So it’s no wonder that in John’s vision of the eternal age to come, those gathered around God’s throne aren’t described one by one, but as an uncountable multitude. They have all come from the “great ordeal” where awful tragedies caused by somebody with a grudge or some nation with a grudge; tragedies caused by paranoia or evil in someone’s heart or someone’s desire to get even. They have all come from the “great ordeal” where evil is real, sin rages in people’s hearts, madness descends, and despair begets violence. We know where the multitudes came from. They are us!

“And they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, singing, ‘Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen!’”

And standing here among the people of God, in this place of worship, we can sense the

truth that good is stronger than evil and that there is something – “something” – that cannot be taken from us because God has given it to us. We, worshiping together know that nothing – “nothing” – can separate us from the love of God. No matter how bad the “great ordeal” becomes, no matter how many bad things happen; nothing can separate us from the love of God given to us in Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior.

Revelation 7:15-17 – ¹⁵For 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. ¹⁶They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; ¹⁷for 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."

May the peace of God . . .

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