

“God Will Wipe Away Every Tear”

Revelation 7:9-17

Last year, many of you joined with me on Monday nights and Wednesday mornings throughout the fall and winter to study the book of Revelation. Many of us began that Bible study with impressions that the book of Revelation is violent and fearsome. Four horsemen unleash destruction and calamity upon the earth. Mysterious numbers like “666” spell destruction. Mutant locusts and a multi-headed beast terrify. A scarlet whore of Babylon seduces nations with her cup of fornications. An end time’s battle of Armageddon leaves millions slaughtered.

An enormous prophecy industry (with the Left Behind novels, video games, and movies) has marketed Revelation as a timetable toward the end of the world. Some even go so far as to claim that the earth itself has to be destroyed before Jesus can return. But this is not how we should read this amazing portion of scripture.

Revelation certainly is the most difficult book in the Bible to understand because it is full of mysterious symbolism. Revelation’s 22 chapters can be intimidating, so it’s important to know that the message of Revelation is most of all, a message of Hope. It is a message of hope for Christians who have been persecuted and oppressed through the centuries. And it’s definitely a message of hope for those of us today who are grieving the loss of loved ones.

As the journey of Revelation unfolds, not unlike the journey of grieving, as each successive vision reminds us that God alone is worthy of our praise and allegiance. Especially when we are suffering, we meet the crucified Lamb, Jesus, who leads his first century people on a great exodus out of an unjust Roman Empire and its system of domination. We meet the

crucified Lamb, Jesus, especially when we are suffering, who leads his people on a great exodus out of the “valley of the shadow of death” to a wondrous river of life, a healing tree of life, and ultimately to a God who lives with us in a renewed creation. The good news at the end of the Revelation journey is that God comes to live with us on earth. God’s will is for the healing of the nations and the healing of our wounded world. This wonderfully hope-filled vision can encourage and strengthen us in the midst of our suffering, in the midst of our grieving, in the midst of whatever crises we encounter today.

The hope-filled vision of Revelation 7 is most often read in churches to celebrate All Saints Sunday or during the funeral services of loved ones. Verses 9-12 describe the multicultural multitude of the saints of God waving palm branches and singing hymns. As we sing songs of praise together with the angels and elders, and with people from every tribe, tongue, people, and nation, we share in a communion of saints that extends through time and place. Our songs are joined with the songs of all Christians who have gone before us – those who have lived and died in Christ. We all are part of the multicultural multitude.

⁹After 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. ¹⁰They cried out in a loud voice, saying, "Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!" ¹¹And 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, ¹²singing, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen."

The saints of God who “come out of the great ordeal,” the saints of God who come out of great suffering, the saints of God who come out of “the valley of the shadow of death,” now serve God. God’s people will not hunger or thirst on their new exodus journey, nor will any scorching wind or sun touch them. God’s people receive the promise that they will come through every adversity, led by their Shepherd, who wipes away all their tears as they journey to God.

¹³Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?" ¹⁴I 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. 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."

Many of us gathered here on this All Saints weekend continue to grieve the loss of a person we loved, continue to shed tears on our journey to God.

Back in seminary days we were required to read Elizabeth Kubler-Ross’ very important book, “On Death and Dying.” She wrote extensively about the six stages of grief into recovery that include denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance, and hope.

As I touch on each of these, think about where you are on your journey through the valley to God.

Denial is when we attempt to reject what has happened to us, pretending that it didn't happen or isn't happening; trying to believe that it hasn't happened. When I walked into the emergency room and a young mother stood up and handed me the dead weight of her not yet one year old son and asked, "Pastor Doug, can you make him alive again?" It was a way of protecting herself against the major shock of an unbelievable loss which, for a time, was simply too much to accept.

Denial is normal and even necessary for a time.

Anger. Once it dawns on you that this loss really has happened, you probably will experience feelings of anger. Or, you may hide your anger from yourself and others, because it's too frightening and you don't know what to do with it without hurting yourself or someone else.

In Nebraska the dirt roads are maintained by huge graders that leave a mound of dirt along one side of the road. If you're going too fast and allow your front wheel to get into those soft ridges of dirt, it is incredibly easy to lose control of your vehicle. During my 9 years in Nebraska, several parishioners died in single vehicle accidents where they lost control, flipping their vehicle through the ditch into a field. Most were alcohol related.

Meeting the parents of a teenager in the emergency room who had flipped his car on the way home from a party at one of many abandoned farmsteads in the country surrounding the town. His parents were angry.

Angry at him for being so reckless and leaving them behind. His mother kept asking, "Why did you leave me?" And certainly angry with God. "Why did you do this to me?" And probably most angry with themselves. "Why did we allow him to go to that party?"

Often anger is followed by bargaining. You feel like you want to make a deal with God, and that you would do anything to have your lost one returned. Or, sometimes we bargain with God when we feel death is near.

One of our Sunday school teachers tells the story of when he was young, he was thrown out of a moving boat and as the propeller tore into his life jacket, he bargained with God. "I'll teach Sunday School for the rest of my life if I survive this." He continues to teach.

Because God and I have a very unique relationship, when I was riding in the back of an ambulance last year, I bargained with God. "If you get me through this, I'm going to buy myself a pick-up truck." God understood perfectly what I was talking about!

Depression. These are sensations of hopelessness and despair. You feel as though life is not worth living and that there is no use going on or of even trying to go on, because "everything has been lost."

You may become listless, fatigued, and find yourself in a very dark place of deep shadows. This is the stage of grief in which many people get stuck because they can't see the light at the end of the tunnel or hear what others are saying when they are trying to be of help.

It is the person stuck in depression that calls me at night to come to their home and meets me at the door to hand me their gun to take home with me.

If the person becomes "unstuck", after depression comes acceptance. You accept the reality of what has happened to you, and are no longer trying to deny it. You have dropped much of your anger. Your depression is beginning to lift, and you are feeling some zest for life.

You are saying "yes" to the reality of your loss and are able to function better, with more openness. You are beginning to see rays of hope for yourself.

Hope is when you regain your spiritual and emotional balance, when you again affirm life, and again fully enter into participating with others in living life together.

Hope is being able to look beyond your present situation and to anticipate the joy of being in the presence of a living, loving Lord.

Hope is knowing the Shepherd will guide you to the springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from your eyes.

May the hope and peace of God . . .

#422 – For All the Saints