

The Lamb at the Center of the Throne

Revelation 7:9-17

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Someone likened Revelation, which literally means an unveiling, or a revealing, as God pulling the curtain back to show us what is about to take place. The timing of when this will take place is always beyond our understanding. Revelation begins by saying, “The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place.” (Revelation 1:1) Right there we are told it is a revelation of what must soon take place. But as this was now nearly 2,000 years ago that the book was written, we humbly admit we do not think of soon in the same way God might think of soon. No wonder, for with the Lord a day is like a thousand years. But whether it is tomorrow or a thousand years from tomorrow, we are promised that the things revealed, the things we see when the curtain is pulled back, are things that will surely take place.

Apparently the ones who gather the scriptures we use in the lectionary felt it important that we take a look behind the curtain on this fourth Sunday after Easter. Without making any claim to having a clear understanding of what is most definitely a book filled with strange and mysterious images, I do believe we can put enough pieces together to form a picture of an image that is filled with hope and promise.

Our passage in Revelation 7:9-17 begins with a great multitude of people, more than can be counted, and that multitude comes from every nation, every tribe, every people, and every language. In this image of a great multitude from every tribe and every nation we see that the promise made to Abraham so many years ago will ultimately be fulfilled. God told that one man Abraham that through him all people would be blessed. It will take place. It is an image lifted up in the second chapter of the prophet Isaiah. “In the last days the mountain of the Lord will be established...and all nations will stream to it.” (Isaiah 2:2) It is Jesus saying, “In my father’s house are many rooms.” Again it is his words that people will come from the east and the west and the north and south to sit at table in the kingdom. And it is a hymn familiar to the early church, that every knee will bow in heaven and on earth and every tongue will confess that Jesus is Lord. The curtain is pulled back to reveal a great multitude, more than anyone can count, a multitude from every nation, tribe, people and language...

And they are standing before the throne. The throne is a central image in Revelation. If you are not familiar with Revelation, you might be surprised to know that it begins with letters written to seven churches in the first century in the area that is now modern day Turkey. These churches are wrestling with contemporary issues, some undergoing persecution, some struggling with idolatry and false teachings, some filled with pride and possessions which lead them to say they are rich...when in reality they are poor. There is the church in Ephesus that is called to account because they have forgotten their first love. There is the church in Laodicea that receives the warning that since they are neither hot nor cold the Lord will spit them out of his mouth. And yet even though most of the churches are struggling along and falling short of their call to be faithful, the letters to the churches end with an invitation from the Lord. "Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me." (Revelation 3:20) That image of us opening the door, maybe the door to our hearts, and inviting Jesus in is one that has been significant for countless people who have opened their lives up for Jesus to come and make a home.

With that image of a door so fresh in our minds, when the letters end, the one receiving the revelation looks and sees a door. This door is standing open. And this door opens into heaven. After a letter to churches here on earth, real life down to earth churches, now a door opens and we see heaven. The curtain is pulled back and we see heaven. And the first thing we see in heaven is a throne. In one of the most understated verses in all of scripture, we are told there was a throne in heaven and someone was sitting on it. Oh! The first thing we see in heaven is a throne, the throne, and that throne is not empty, it is not vacant, it is not unoccupied, that throne has someone sitting on it. After a description of this majestic throne and after we told that it is surrounded by 24 elders sitting on 24 other thrones and that there are four living creatures surrounding the throne, we find out who is sitting on that throne. The four living creatures sing an ancient and glorious hymn, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come." Who is sitting on the throne in heaven? The Lord God Almighty. The curtain is pulled back and we are permitted to see that it is the Lord God Almighty who sits on the throne in heaven.

When you read the whole Revelation from start to finish it clearly depicts a cosmic conflict. Satan with all of his beasts and dragons is waging war against the kingdom of heaven. Written in apocalyptic language many have read Revelation and focused on Satan and his efforts to rebel and to destroy and to ascend to the throne in heaven. But at no point in Revelation does Satan ever ascend to the throne. There is a throne in heaven and the Lord God Almighty is sitting on it. “Hallelujah! The Lord God omnipotent reigneth!” Forever. And ever. And ever.

In Revelation 9 we have a multitude from every nation and tongue and tribe standing before the throne, the throne occupied by the Lord God Almighty. This great multitude is wearing white robes. This part of the revelation is a sober reminder that even though God is on his throne, we who live on earth are still engaged in a spiritual battle that manifests itself in conflict, trials, tribulations, and suffering. The ones wearing the white robes have come out of a great tribulation, a great struggle, a time of great suffering. Because we also are still engaged in a spiritual battle we do well to hear the words of exhortation that we find in Revelation. Like those early believers we are also called to patient endurance. Like the church in Ephesus we are called to remember our first love, and to keep the flames of that love burning bright, so that we are not the lukewarm Christians from Laodicea who warrant being spit out of the mouth.

These ones who have come out of the great tribulation are wearing white robes. How those robes got to be so white is a wonderful revelation. They washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. To understand this passage of Revelation and to understand the whole book of Revelation we need to focus on this Lamb whose blood can wash white the robes of the ones who endured the great tribulation.

Revelation first introduces us to the Lamb in chapter 5. There is a scroll that needs to be broken open and for a time it seems no one is worthy to break open the scroll. Then a mighty and powerful figure appears who is worthy to open the scroll. It is a Lion, in fact the Lion of the tribe of Judah, a figure majestic and triumphant. But something incredible takes place as we meet the Lion of the Tribe of Judah, who is worthy to break open the scroll. We see that the Lion is in reality a Lamb, and this Lamb looks as if it has been slain. That is just about enough to take our breath away. People wanted

Jesus to be a strong and victorious ruler. They wanted a lion that conquered all God's enemies. What God gave, the one God sent, was the Lamb of God who took away the sin of the world. As a sign that the Lamb of God does indeed take away the sin of the world, the great multitude in chapter have washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb, and now those robes are white.

What follows is an image we recognize. The great multitude from every nation and tribe and tongue, whose robes are washed white in the blood of the Lamb, are holding palm branches. It wasn't too long ago we held palm branches and sang out, "Hosanna. Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest!" There are songs of praise in the seventh chapter of Revelation. Waving their palm branches the great multitude sings out,

"Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb."

At that very moment all the angels standing around the throne and all the elders and those four living creatures break out in song together:

"Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!"

Revelation 7 is only one third of the way through the whole book of Revelation. There is so much more to come. It will culminate with a new heaven and a new earth. the curse that has befallen creation is removed. The tree of life bears its fruit and the leaves of that tree bring healing for all the nations. The promise of God will come true, for he will wipe away every tear from our eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain. Revelation 7 is not there yet. That all comes at the very end.

But here in Revelation 7, where we have stopped by for a brief visit today, a great multitude from every tribe and tongue is gathered at the throne, the throne that is occupied by the Lord God Almighty and the throne that has the Lamb of God at the very center. Robes have been washed, palm branches have been raised, and songs of praise are being sung. Even though we haven't reached the end, our passage speaks of the good things that will come. "Never again will they hunger, never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat upon them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

(Revelation 7:16, 17)

Apparently the ones who gather the scriptures we use in the lectionary felt it important that we take a look behind the curtain on this fourth Sunday after Easter. I'm glad we have been able to look behind the curtain today. There have been moments, really just a few moments, but enough moments to transform my life, there have been moments when God has pulled back the curtain and given me a glimpse. Sometimes we need that. Sometimes we need to be reminded where this is all headed. Sometimes we need to be reminded that in heaven there is a throne, and there is someone on it. Sometimes we need to be reminded that the day is coming, indeed in God's time it is very soon, when every tear will be wiped away.

When we moved to Houston and I became the pastor of the church there I was young, just 34 years old. Gordan and Retha Musgrove were a couple who proved very helpful to me in learning my way as a pastor. They were a sweet couple. They were not afraid to share difficult words when they needed to be said, but always shared words of encouragement and hope. A few years into our time in Houston their health began to fail, and that was really difficult, for me and for the whole church. You know people like that, ones whose very presence seems to bring a sense of calm and security. Gordan had been our treasurer for many years. He was an elder, a teacher, and a fountain of wisdom. But now Gordan was at the end of his life, and so was Retha. They died within just a few days of each other. Toward the end my visits with Gordan became quiet affairs where he would at times recognize me and visit, and other times simply rest peacefully. With that in mind, the last time I visited him I slipped quietly into his room, hoping not to disturb his rest.

To my surprise he greeted me warmly and asked what I was doing there. This caught me off guard. I hesitated, a bit puzzled, and then told him I had come to visit. He looked around anxiously, and then finally asked, "Do you know anything about what is going on around this place?" My silence let him know I wasn't getting it, so he continued. "Well, you must know something about cattle or they wouldn't have brought you out here. But I can't figure out what they want with me. I've never been a cowboy and I don't know anything about this. I just don't why they needed me for this job."

As he talked on, I found out that Gordan was on a trail ride. Saddled on his horse, he was herding cattle. No longer an aged man he was, he was in his prime, riding tall, branding and roping, riding hard and riding herd. After a few minutes of short conversation he told me I better move on because they really needed him to get back to work. I think he appreciated the prayer I offered, but I do know for certain he wasn't sad to see me go. He had pressing business. They needed him on the trail.

I stepped out of the dark halls of the hospital into the bright sunlight of a crisp autumn afternoon. And I smiled. I thought of heaven. Gordan's wife, Retha, would soon die, as would Gordan. But on that day, it did not seem so much like Gordan was close to death, but rather that he was close to life. Resurrection life. A wave of joy crashed over me as I imagined a heavenly scene. A strapping young cowboy is coming home from a long day in the saddle. He looks over the horizon and his beautiful bride, mounted on a glistening stallion is galloping to meet him. Do not bother to interrupt them. They have business to attend. There is a heavenly herd to be cared for, and in the newness of the resurrection, their days are filled with faithfully serving their king.

It wasn't until later that I discovered a cowboy song I think old Gordan would truly appreciate. It is called THE UNCLOUDED DAY. It was written by Rev. J.K. Alwood. Some friends of mine from California who pretend to be cowboys formed a little singing group and one of my favorite memories is Jack Hanna and the Sons of the San Joaquin singing The Uncloved Day.

*Oh, they tell me of a home far beyond the skies
Oh, they tell me of a home far away
Oh, they tell me of a home where no storm clouds rise
Oh, they tell me of an unclouded day

Oh, they tell me of a home where my friends have gone
Oh, they tell me of that land far away
Where the tree of life in eternal bloom
Sheds its fragrance through the unclouded day

Oh, they tell me of a King in His beauty there
And they tell me that mine eyes shall behold
Where He sits on the throne that is whiter than snow
In the city that is made of gold*

*Oh, they tell me that He smiles on His children there
And His smile drives their sorrows all away
And they tell me that no tears ever come again
In that lovely land of unclouded day*

*Oh, the land of cloudless day
Oh, the land of an unclouded day
Oh, they tell me of a home where no storm clouds rise
Oh, they tell me of an unclouded day*

Apparently the ones who gather the scriptures we use in the lectionary felt it important that we take a look behind the curtain on this fourth Sunday after Easter. I don't know about you, but I needed it. I needed to be reminded that soon, oh, so very soon, we will be gathered with all of our loved ones in the lovely land of unclouded day.

My dad got sick in 1998 and he died in 2004. Those were some of the saddest years in my life. The disease that eventually took his life robbed him of so much that had made him the man he was. As my dad got more and more sick, I would have dreams that were very difficult. In my dreams, my dad would be smiling. I would awake from these dreams with a sad ache in my heart. One of the first effects his illness had on him was called masking. His face lost the ability to express feelings, and so he could no longer smile. That might have been the most difficult thing to lose.

Take away the ability to walk. Take away the ability to talk. Take away the ability to eat, even the ability to go to the bathroom. That was all bad enough. But don't take away his smile. Not that beaming smile that would light up at a good joke (or even a bad one), the smile that would ignite when he saw one of his grandchildren, the self-effacing smile that would recognize when he had goofed up or been had by one of our countless pranks. Give us the smile.

But the disease took the smile. And that hurt.

And then when my dad died, I saw my dad smile again. His death brought together a wonderful group of family and friends, ones who dropped their plans and came to our little home town at great cost and sacrifice. That meant so much to me and my family. Every person who came to share with us in our grief was an incredible gift and blessing. But I don't think I can describe what it meant when dad himself walked into our backyard the night before we had his memorial service. Yes, you heard me right. My dad walked into our backyard the night before we had his memorial service. We were all gathered together and he walked right into the back yard....twice. His brothers, Uncle Roger and Uncle Herb flew in from Ohio. When they walked into our back yard it was like seeing my dad in his prime. Their faces were full of expression. They were telling jokes like my dad. They both went through the food line like my dad. And they both smiled, just like my dad. I was drinking a glass of wine that evening, but to paraphrase an old rock and roll song, "It wasn't wine I had too much of it was a double shot of my father's love."

I guess that pretty much expresses how I feel about my dad's death. I miss him. But boy is it good to know the mask has been taken off. Our hope in the resurrection life of Jesus Christ, the promise that he will make all things new makes me believe the mask is gone. Like the book of Revelation tells us, "God will wipe away every tear from our eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away...Our God is making everything new."

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"Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen...For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be our shepherd; he will lead us to springs of living water. And he will wipe away every tear from our eyes."