

Robed in White

November 1, 2020

Bendersville & Wenksville United Methodist Churches

Revelation 7:9-17

When I was in...maybe, late middle school or early high school, comet Hale-Bopp flew past the earth. As many of you might remember, Hale-Bopp was one of the brightest comets of our lifetime, and was probably visible from earth, to the naked eye, for about 18 months or so.

Also, in March of that year – it was the year 1997 – there was an almost total lunar eclipse, on the same night that Mars would be positioned almost directly opposite earth from the sun – meaning that we would be able to see a comet, and a brightly-illuminated red planet, and the sliver of a lunar eclipse all on one night.

And I remember earlier that week, I had one friend who made the off-handed comment to me that in the book of Revelation it says that at the end of the world the sky will be turned to darkness – like an eclipse – and there will be a comet and a red planet in the sky. And I panicked. Like, totally panicked. And I went searching, and searching for where the Bible said that. And I remember being so relieved when I woke up the morning after that magnificent astronomical event to discover that, no, that's not what the book of Revelation had said or meant, and no, the world had not ended.

The book of Revelation is, I think, both at the same time one of the most revered and one of the most avoided books in the Bible. We have, on one hand, people who base almost their entire theology on the book of Revelation, always and forever looking at world events with an eye toward how they might align with the symbolism that we see outlined in Revelation. And always asking the question: Are we living in the end times?

And then we have people who would just as soon ignore the fact that Revelation even exists. It is confusing, it reads like a particularly scary dream, and some of the images would really be beautifully suited either to Halloween costumes or fantasy horror movies. Plus, it is so future-oriented, that why bother with it when today has enough troubles of its own?

And I think that both of these approaches – while totally understandable – miss the point of Revelation. Revelation is concerned about future events, yes, but it is every bit as concerned about what is happening right now, and what was happening in the first century Roman empire when it was originally written. It is concerned about world events, yes, but it is more concerned about our everyday lives and concerns and worries and fears. It does talk about the kingdom of heaven and the four horsemen of the apocalypse, absolutely. And we will be talking about that today. But it doesn't talk about these things to give us nightmares. Quite the opposite. Revelation is not here as a

predictor of doom and destruction and the end of the world, but as a powerful word of hope in the face of what may sometimes *feel like* the end of the world.

So, before we get to our scripture reading for today, I'd like to back up a couple chapters in Revelation. Because even though today's reading is a beautiful one – especially for All Saints Day, even standing on its own, it is a whole lot more powerful when we back up and read it in context. Today's reading is the answer to the chapters that come before.

So, backing up. In Revelation chapter 5 John has a vision of an angel presenting him with a scroll – basically a book – that nobody – no one in heaven or on earth, or anywhere else is worthy to unroll or to read. Nobody, that is, except the Lamb of God. Jesus. The one who takes away the sins of the world. This scroll is fixed with seven seals. Basically like a wax seal that you would see on an old-timey envelope that would indicate whether this envelope has been opened or not.

So this super-secret scroll is secured by not one, not two, but *seven* seals.

And in then in chapter 6 the Lamb – Jesus – the only one who is worthy to read what is inside – opens each of the seals, one by one. And in the opening of each seal, something terrifying is revealed. Giant horses with riders who bring pain and destruction. The martyrs crying out from the grave. The sky going black. I told you this is the stuff of a Halloween movie.

But if we look just a little bit closer, these scary things aren't new judgments that God is bringing about. Every single one of them is something that we *already* face. A place of fear, of pain, of vulnerability, of brokenness that we wrestle with every single day.

When the first seal is broken, and a white horse rears up with a mighty conqueror on its back, we are brought face to face with the threat of conquest, raising the question: where does our security come from? In the first century, Rome was the most secure nation on the planet, yet even it had its limits and it would one day fall. And for us living in today's world with threats of terrorism and nuclear war popping up every few years, it's like this horseman is staring us in the face, and our vulnerability is unmasked.

When the second seal is broken, a red horse rises up, reminding us of the violence that we as people do to one another. The ways that we take away one another's peace. And that happens on individual levels as well as big, social levels. Whether through cyber-bullying, or domestic violence on one hand, or major riots on the other hand, violence is – and has always been – an unfortunate part of our life in a broken world.

Then we see, when the third seal is broken, the threat of food shortages and economic hardship. Something that the first century Romans would have been very familiar with, and something that we today also wrestle with.

And then the fourth seal, bringing us face to face with death. That thing that we fear so deeply, that we pray against so fervently, and yet that reality that every one of us is bound to face.

Then the fifth seal is broken and we see the martyrs calling out. Another reality of life – that persecution and pain is everywhere.

And then the sixth seal. A giant earthquake. The sky goes black. The moon shines red like blood. Even the earth itself feels like it is groaning.

So chapter 6 ends with a question: In the face of all of this: When Christ brings us face-to-face with all of the brokenness of this world – with war and threats of war; with violence and threats of violence; with food shortages and economic collapse; with persecution and pain and natural disaster and disease and death – when the world is turned as upside-down as it can possibly get, *who is able to stand?*

And just when we are tempted to throw up our hands and give up and say, “Nobody. Nobody can withstand all of that. How long, O Lord, will this go on?” we cut to chapter 7. Before the seventh and final seal is broken, today’s scripture cuts through all of the pain and suffering and brokenness of the world and answers that question for us. Who is able to stand?

“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.”

And then skipping down several verses:

“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,
and worship him day and night within his temple,
and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them.*

They 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,

and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

So in the face of disaster and destruction, of war and famine, of sickness and death, of violence and fear, who is able to stand? In the face of wildfires and hurricanes, and pandemics and murder hornets; in the face of joblessness and domestic violence and depression and deep isolation; in the face of sadness and grief and uncertainty and disappointment, who can stand?

The saints. That's who.

And I've got news for you, folks, that means us. You and me. The church. Living today, in today's messy world. You and I are part of that great multitude, washed and made clean, robed in white, singing our praises with palm branches in our hands.

Sometimes I think that when we think about saints, or talk colloquially about saints – when we say “so-and-so is such a saint” – what we think about is somebody who is, if not perfect, then darn-well near perfect. Somebody who always makes the right choices. Somebody who stands about a foot above the rest of us. Or, we may think about our faithful departed – those people from our community of faith or those people in our lives who have passed away, and who God has made perfect on the other side of the grave – made into saints. If we think about who we might identify as modern-day saints, we might name people like Mother Teresa, or Martin Luther King, Jr., or Fred Rogers, or maybe a beloved Sunday School teacher or a deeply-faithful, deeply-beloved, seemingly all-wise friend.

But that's not the way the Bible talks about saints. Throughout scripture, saints are not heavenly beings crowned with halos of light. And they are not super-Christians, either. When Paul refers to the saints in his letters, he is talking about the church. The whole church. And not just the best parts of the church. He's talking about the body of Christians – normal, everyday, messy, messed-up, stick-our-foot-in-our-mouths, trip-and-stumble-and-fall Christians. He's talking about those of us who may be well-intentioned, but we still speak out of turn and hurt people's feelings, or we post on Social Media without thinking first. Or we get angry and lash out inappropriately. Or we wrestle awkwardly with hard questions that cause us to doubt our faith. Or we call into question the faith of those we disagree with, without getting to know them first.

We are messy. We are awkward. We are unkempt. We are unsteady. At least, on our surface that is who we are. Or maybe, when we look at ourselves, that is who we fear we are. And we worry that with everything that is facing us in today's world – everything that the broken seals of Revelation 6 shows us about our world – that we won't have the strength or the wisdom or the wherewithal to stand.

And yet, that's not the way God sees us. Are we messy? Yes. Are we awkward? Yes. Do we get things wrong? Yes. Yes, yes, yes. But that is not who we are. And all of that pales in comparison to the beauty and the glory and the honor and the power of the God who washes us clean, and robes us in white and calls us saints. Every one of us.

And together, as the saints of God, we all stand, united as a vast multitude. A multitude of saints who have been through an ordeal. Who have come face-to-face with our own vulnerabilities, our own fears, our own weaknesses, our own expressions of sin, but have been washed clean. And as a vast multitude standing together, all of a sudden

those seven seals and those four horsemen don't seem quite so intimidating. Because we are no longer standing alone, and our strength is no longer just our own.

In the face of everything that life brings – everything that the year 2020 brings – who is able to stand? You are. I am. We are, together.

So today let us join together as the saints of God, together with all of the saints of God both on this side of the grave and the next – together with one another here, now and those who have gone before us – with the Lamb of God, Christ Jesus at our center. And in the strength of this multitude may we face this day, this season of life, with joy and strength and hope.