

PLAYING FORWARD

Revelation 7:9-17; 1 John 3:1-3

“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...” So the book of Revelation describes the company of the glorified and the victorious martyrs in heaven, standing in the presence of God.

The Book of Revelation is perhaps the most perplexing book in the Bible. It is an example of an apocalypse, a literary form in which the present age is seen as hopelessly evil and soon to be overcome by the intervention of God, who will create from the righteous, both living and dead, an entirely new and perfect age for the everlasting enjoyment of God’s followers. The Book of Revelation was written at a time when Christians in Asia Minor were being persecuted by the Roman Empire for their refusal to worship the emperors and the goddess Roma. The author of Revelation was writing to strengthen and encourage followers of Jesus in this time of persecution and to sharpen for these followers the alternative of worshiping either Caesar or God, making martyrdom and its rewards so attractive that the persecutions could be endured.

The Book of Revelation was probably written at the end of the reign of Emperor Domitian who died in 96 CE and who was especially ruthless in persecuting Christians for their disloyalty to the state in not embracing him as god. The Book of Revelation is not a description of the end of the world, as it has frequently been taken to be, but is rather an attempt to speak to the times in which it was written, expressing the hope that in

the end God will prevail and those who have come through the great ordeal will come out on the other side rewarded with life everlasting for their faithfulness.

You will not find much in the Book of Revelation about what life everlasting is beyond the belief that death is banished and that the faithful are freed of the fear of death and the fear that loved ones will die. It seems we will then have all the time in the world. But what will we do with all that time? We are told that we shall be forever singing—one can only hope that the songs will be good ones. Anything else? It's hard to know. Everything we do know and care about has as its background the preciousness of time, but with all the time in the world, would we care? The drama of living would apparently be gone. Sure, we're glad to be rid of threats and anxieties, but as they go so too goes the tension that makes for anticipation and pleasure and satisfaction and all that intrigues. Have you ever been so content with anything that you could be so content forever? We might assume that living more directly in the presence of God would change everything, and we'd better assume that, because without the prospect of death and the urgency death brings to life, everything we know falls into meaninglessness.

When I preside at funerals, I always say in one way or another that it is not worthwhile to speculate about the next life. We don't know anything about it, and imagination fails us when we try to offer descriptions. It's not that God can't give us life after life, but we cannot think about it meaningfully, or at least no more meaningfully than we could think about the life we are presently living before we were conceived. Better at a time of memorial to remember the loved one who has died and how s/he brought life to our lives, how s/he is missed, and allow for the hope that somehow the life

of someone we love so much might somehow be preserved in God. But how this is so, no one can say.

I indicated at the beginning that the book of Revelation is about the times in which it was written, when Christians were suffering greatly and needed encouragement to persist in their faith. It is a book very much about the world as it was being experienced at the end of the First Century of the Common Era in what we today call the Holy Land.

Reading the words “a great multitude” on this All Saints’ Sunday, shortly after October 31, 2011, when the world’s population hit seven billion people, the sense of multitude takes on a distinctive meaning. Seven billion is an estimate. No one can actually say within tens of millions of people how many people there are on earth at any given time. At the time of the birth of Jesus, it is estimated there were 200 million people on the planet. The global population took another 1700 years or so to reach the one billion mark, just a couple of years after Thomas Malthus published his famous essay warning that human numbers would be held in check by war and pestilence and famine. The warning was perhaps too dire, for by 1968 there were about 3 1/2 billion people on the planet. One October 12, 1999, the number reached six billion. Fourteen years from now there will be eight billion people on the earth, most of this growth occurring in the world’s poorer countries. If Malthus’ “Essay on the Principle of Population” in 1798 proved to be wrong, his premise that there must be some limit to population growth seems correct. How many people can the earth support and under what conditions?

In any case, we are certainly a great multitude on earth, whatever the multitude may be in heaven. And it is about this earthly multitude of souls with whom we presently

share this life that we must be concerned, this multitude which hungers and thirsts, which is subject to the consequences of climate change that is happening even as we are gathered here, this multitude that suffers myriad heartaches and weeps tears of anguish. As we remember on an All Saints' Sunday the souls that have gone before us and whom we have loved and miss, we must also be concerned with the souls of our generations, here and now, and the future generations yet to come.

This is the second week of our stewardship campaign for 2012. On an All Saints' Sunday, we are, as I say, inevitably mindful of those who have gone before us in the faith and, gathered together as we are, the legacy bequeathed to us in and through *this* congregation by those who have gone before us here. They came here and prayed and built buildings and made music and cooked food and planned events and strove to bring their faith to bear in the world of their experience. They gave time and money and their abilities to creating a congregation and making this congregation a church bearing witness to the love of God. And here we are, the inheritors of all this and more, playing forward what our forebears have handed down. This is our time to be Emanuel, our time to bear witness. We have in one way or another chosen to be part of this community and members of the body of Christ in this place at this time.

On an All Saints' Sunday, the question of stewardship is prominent—what do we make of what we have received from those who came before us here? A pledge of our personal resources and energies to the life of the community is a commitment to the communion of saints, past and future, an affirmation of the tradition that begins in Christ and ends we know not where, a movement borne out of a life and death struggle for a vision of God and humanity that is rooted in compassion, a struggle that persists to our

own day. As I said last week, a pledge to the work of the church is a spiritual exercise for the one who pledges regardless of its material consequences. It is a way of saying I put myself in the line of the communion of saints in the faith that this is how one lives as a true child of God.

In the First Letter of John we read, “Beloved, we are God’s children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed.” We are grateful for all we have received and hopeful for what might yet be accomplished, but our communion is in this moment a communion within a larger communion and with its own contribution to make. It is to this that our pledges of faith are dedicated. Amen.

All Saints’ Sunday, November 6, 2011

Emanuel Lutheran Church