

October 30, 2011  
All Saints Sunday

Isaiah 25: 6–9  
Revelation 7: 9–17

### **“Out of the Great Ordeal”**

I have a saying I believe I have shared with some of you; Belva knows it well, and understands from my perspective as a pastor, that “regardless of what day of the week it is, ...Monday, Wednesday, Thursday, ...tomorrow is Sunday!” We pastors need to pinch ourselves on a regular basis to remind ourselves that Sunday is the first day of the week. This is not an easy thing for pastors to do, that is, think of Sunday as the first day of the week, because everything that has been going on from the previous Monday through yesterday, Saturday, has in some way or another been a part of preparation for the service of worship we offer on the Lord’s Day. Sunday feels like the culmination of a week of hard work, rather than the launch pad for what is to come in the week ahead.

The reason pastors need to be reminded that Sunday is the first day of the week has to do with you, and all who gather during this hour on the Lord’s Day, ...all who come out of whatever trials, tribulations, concerns and fears, as well as joys and celebrations you have known in the week past, to be reminded, as John has in our text this morning, that we are now, in this hour, gathered before the throne of God, with the Lamb at the center ...in our midst. Coming out of whatever ordeal we have experienced in days, weeks, months now past, we are today reminded of that of which we constantly and repeatedly need to be reminded, namely, that as we move forward from here, God will shelter us; we will hunger and thirst no more; the heat of the sun will not scorch us; the Lamb is our shepherd and he will guide us to springs of the water of life; and God will wipe away every tear from our eyes.

Now this is no pie in the sky description of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. It may well be that whatever ordeal you have come, or are coming through may well be the ordeal that will continue for you in the weeks and months ahead. Life will always continue to be difficult, and this is precisely why we need to come into this sanctuary like clockwork, each Lord’s Day to hear the good news that the Lamb is in our midst, guiding us into the future, a future in which, ultimately, there will be no more ordeals such as the ones we endure in this world. The Gospel is given to us and comes to us as God’s message that keeps us looking ahead, to the future with hope and joy,

knowing that our future is with God, with our Lord Jesus Christ, and with one another, beyond the great ordeal, as John put it. This is the big picture John wants us to see, as he reminds us that even though we go through trials, troubles and tribulation in this world, God is with us in these present times, wanting us to have this vision of the future that fills us with hope, strength and joy grounded in His promise that our future is with Him in His new creation.

John's vision of the throne room of God gives us a visual portrayal of what Isaiah proclaimed to his people, hundreds of years earlier, a message that is for us today as well:

“(God) will destroy on this mountain (Jerusalem)  
the shroud that is cast over all peoples,  
the sheet that is spread over all nations;  
he will swallow up death forever.

Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces,  
and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth,  
for the Lord has spoken.

It will be said on that day,  
'Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him,  
so that he might save us.

This is the Lord for whom we have waited;  
let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation!”

(Isaiah 25:7-9)

Do you see what I am saying, how our faith calls us into the future with strength, confidence, hope and joy ...inviting us to set aside all that has afflicted us up to this point in time, and reflect upon the promises of God that lie ahead for us in the fullness of His time? It is a great and wonderful thing to be able to think of and experience Sunday as the first day of a new week, for we live with the assurance that the Lamb is our Shepherd, and He will be with us, guiding us through whatever ordeal may come. I think of Margaret Fleming as a good example of what I am saying. At 95 or 97 years of age, her body is wearing out even though her mind is sharp as a tack. Every day for her is a struggle, physically, just to get up and get going. Making this move to Birmingham tomorrow is a huge endeavor for her and for Julia Ann. But her faith in God's promises keeps her looking to the future with joy and hope. She has always told me that God must have something else for her to do, but she does not have a clue what that is. Perhaps that “something” is the testimony she gives us in the way

she holds so strongly to God's promises, anticipating the future, His future for her.

Let's look at how John presents to us this bigger picture of what God is doing in creation. In chapter 6 of Revelation the Lamb that was slaughtered begins to break the seals on seven scrolls. The writings on these scrolls are descriptive of the wars, the destruction, the pain, the suffering and the tribulation that characterize this world and our life experiences. The writings also inform us that God is present and that regardless of how things appear to us, God's purposes in and for this world are being worked out. It is unfortunate that the descriptions of the world's tribulations in Revelation strike so many as horrific, leading many of us to not want to press further into Revelation's message for us. To me, watching the evening news is every bit as scary as reading Revelation, perhaps because the news we see and hear there is the actual reporting of things that John tells us in Revelation will come to pass.

Revelation was not written to scare people. To the contrary, John wrote it to comfort and give hope to Christians who were enduring great suffering because of their devotion to their faith in Jesus Christ. He also wrote for the purpose of chastising and calling to repentance those who have compromised their faith, saying one thing with their lips, but demonstrating devotion to the idols of this world in their actions; chastising Christians for what Dietrich Bonheoffer would later call "cheap grace," coming to church on Sunday, confessing sin to receive forgiveness, but not really giving ourselves completely over to God. Cheap grace requires no personal sacrifice on our part.

Chapter 7 comes as an interlude between the opening of the seals on the sixth and the seventh scrolls, ...so we get a bit of respite from the burdens of the weight of the world. The scene in our text is the throne room of God, with God seated on the throne with the Lamb at his side. And there are two great multitudes of people, all present and worshipping God. One multitude is clearly described as being all the tribes of Israel, a hundred and forty-four thousand in number. The other multitude, the subject of our text this morning, is, apparently, the Gentiles. But this great multitude from every nation, and from all tribes and peoples and languages, are also martyrs, ...those who paid the ultimate price in this world for truly living and standing by their faith, those whom Bonheoffer would identify and the recipients of "costly grace." Their white robes are symbolic of their victory as well

as the completion of their baptisms. Palm branches are also signs of joy and of victory.

This interlude between the breaking of the seals on the sixth and the seventh scrolls is rather much like a time out. Life in this world can be harsh with so much danger, suffering and death. In the midst of the tribulation, John is given a glimpse into the future God has prepared for us, and he reports it to us. John is not telling the Christians to whom he is writing, both in his day and us today, that the end of suffering is coming very soon and that therefore all they have to do is hang on a little longer. Rather, John is telling us that the present, as well as the future, are in God's hand and therefore, the end is worth waiting for and living for, a message that is good and important for us to hear, repeatedly, at the beginning ...on the first day of each week. So, cling to your faith! Never forsake it. Live it at all times. Strive in this life to be among those who wash their robes in the blood of the Lamb. (Gonzalez and Gonzalez. Revelation. Westminster Bible Companion, pg 60).

When we look at this world with all its problems, wars, starvation, poverty and unrest, and as we consider the burden that 7 billion people place upon the earth's limited resources, we could easily slide into a permanent state of despair and despondency regarding the future. Where is history going and what will we come to? Years ago, when I first really studied the Revelation to John, John's message came to me as a breath of fresh air and hopefulness, an interlude in the middle of world tribulation. Hear what my Church History professors, Catherine and Justo Gonzalez have written about the Revelation to John:

"As Christians, we live out of the same future that John announced to his readers at the end of the first century: the future when God's will shall be fulfilled. John reminded his readers, and reminds us still, that they had, and we have, a hope that cannot be taken away from us, a vision of what God intends for the world, and it is out of that hope and that vision that we must live our lives today. John's hope, as well as ours, was grounded on certain events in the past that guaranteed the final outcome of history --- the incarnation, the crucifixion, and the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

John's hope for the future is not based on some hidden discovery of exactly how or when the end will come, but on

what was then, and is today, at the very heart of the Christian faith: that we need not fear the final outcome of history, for we have seen (the final outcome's) face in Jesus Christ." (Gonzalez and Gonzalez. Revelation. Westminster Bible Companion, pg 10).

Because we know and we believe that God has created a future for us beyond this world, a future where there will be no more hungering, no more thirsting, no more suffering, ...a future where God Himself will wipe away every tear from our eyes, we look forward to that day when we shall stand before the throne of God, before the Lamb, in the presence of the elders and the angels, ...all God's creatures, and sing together the hymn that Isaiah wrote:

"Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him,  
so that he might save us.  
This is the Lord for whom we have waited;  
let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation!"

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Today is the Lord's Day that falls before All Saints Day. On this day we remember and give thanks for those in our church family who have finished the race God created them to run in this world. We give thanks for their lives of devotion, faithfulness and service. We are grateful for the faith that fills us with assurance that having left this world, we know that they are now resting in God's peace. Their baptisms having been made complete in death, sealed by God in our Lord Jesus Christ, we look to the future with the anticipation that the day is coming when we will join them in the fullness of the Church Triumphant. Please stand as we remember our sister and our brothers in Christ, and remain standing as we affirm our faith together.

Bill Flanagan – Doris Kelso – George Megar – Lyman Mitchell

The Lord be with you. Let us pray: Gracious God, look upon these saints whom you created in your image, and claimed as your own through baptism. Comfort them and strengthen us with your promise of life eternal, made sure for all in the death and resurrection of your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.