

Scriptures: Revelation 7:9-17

7:9 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, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands.

7:10 They cried out in a loud voice, saying, "Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!"

7:11 And 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,

7:12 singing, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen."

7:13 Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?"

7:14 I 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.

7:15 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.

7:16 They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat;

7:17 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."

John 10:22-30

10:22 At that time the festival of the Dedication took place in Jerusalem. It was winter,

10:23 and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the portico of Solomon.

10:24 So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly."

10:25 Jesus answered, "I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name testify to me;

10:26 but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep.

10:27 My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me.

10:28 I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand.

10:29 What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father's hand.

10:30 The Father and I are one."

Proclamation of the Word

Jesus and the Father have unity of purpose. They are one. And we who follow Jesus have the same purpose. Then consider this. Scott Hoezee writes,

In one of the iterations of the Superman movie franchise, the movie Man of Steel (2013), there is a scene that I think is supposed to evoke something of a divine perspective on the world—maybe it is even supposed to mimic how Christ Jesus perceives the world. At one point in the film Superman flies through the skies and clear out into space. He hovers just beyond earth's atmosphere and as he floats there, we can hear what he hears with his super hearing: multitudes of cries, shouts of terror, people weeping, children sobbing. It is the sound of a hurting planet.

At one point Superman says to someone—Lois Lane I think—that whereas any one of us may occasionally hear a tiny fractional sliver of the suffering that goes on in this world at any given moment, "I hear everything." For most of us, the prospect of "hearing everything" that goes on around us—particularly the sorrows and the sufferings—would be unbearable. Ignorance allows us to survive most of the time. Indeed, who but God alone is big enough, strong enough, loving enough to hear everything without also being unmade by it?'

God hears everything. God sees everything. In this great vision from Revelation, John shows us a picture of heaven. Because of the suffering and persecution God's people have endured in faith, God will shelter them and wipe away all tears from their eyes. They will hunger nor thirst anymore. The Lamb will be their shepherd and guide them to springs of life. And in the end they will worship in the eternal presence of God. What a beautiful vision of heaven!

Now we know that John of Patmos is writing in code. The Church was a persecuted church in first century and this book of Revelation is filled with a political message that would have had the writer crucified by the Emperor, just as Jesus was. John shows us with vivid image and poetry what would have been encouragement for the weary and suffering church.

One thing this passage from Revelation shows us is that Christ is a friend and savior of those who suffer. In fact, Jesus came to show the reign of God or the kingdom of heaven. And he did so by coming in person to earth to do the work of the Father. In John's gospel reading today, Jesus is clear. He comes to bring life so that his sheep will not perish. His works, or signs, point us to the reign of God, the kingdom of heaven. In Jesus' life, he brought sight to the blind, healed the sick, ate with sinners, and restored people. Jesus was always concerned with people who were hurting, the left out, the lost, and the least of these. When Jesus says to the religious leaders, "The Father and I are one." Scholars tell us that this is not about controversies of later centuries about the substance and nature of Christ, but about purpose. Jesus and the Father are one in purpose. They are committed to the work of salvation. Between Jesus and the Father there is unity of purpose, oneness.

But do we have to wait to see that healing and salvation until we get to heaven? Do we just live with, accept sorrow, broken systems, suffering on earth and tell folks, you will get your reward in the sweet bye and bye?

No. Not at all. Last Saturday I was struck by a story of healing mercy and hope as I listened to Story Corps. Story Corps is a podcast and radio program lifting up human stories in order to build connections between people and to create a more just and compassionate world.ⁱⁱ

On this particular day, the interviewer tells us that Veterans of the Gulf War met at Fort Stewart to commemorate the 25th anniversary of the cease fire. In 1991 during battle Specialist Andy Alaniz was killed in friendly fire. Col. David Taylor has carried Alaniz's death with him for 25 years. He was one of the officers leading the troops that accidentally killed Alaniz. Col. Taylor came to this reunion at the request of Alaniz's widow, Catherine. Taylor remembers that they had been fighting for 3 1/2 days in horrible weather. Col. David Taylor could see potential for trouble, but did not speak up even though he saw the potential for friendly fire. Every day for 25 years he has thought about that death. Here is what they shared.

Taylor (choking up): I feel that this whole thing could have been prevented.

Catherine: I don't think it's your place to carry that burden any longer. Andy would not want that. That's not how he was.

Taylor: The fact that you say that makes it easier for me to accept....I did not want to come here, but I told myself that would make it right. Sorry it took 25 years to do it...now that I met you, I feel whole. I can live my life now. Without doing this it would still be an emptiness in me.

Catherine: I am just grateful you reached out. I guess I thought I was the only one that remembered him. That's my biggest fear is that as time goes on people will forget.

Taylor: We will never let that happen. That event changed my life. So there's two of us to make sure he is not forgotten.

And God will wipe away every tear....In this human exchange, something beautiful happened. There was honesty, healing, reconciliation. It did not change the past, but it did change the lives of the two people touched by the death of Andy Alaniz. Both Col. Taylor and Catherine were made a little more whole through their conversation. For Colonel Taylor, Catherine's forgiveness, understanding, and absolution saved him from the burden of grief, guilt, and blame. It was like...salvation.

Jesus and the Father have unity of purpose- that purpose is to bring healing salvation to the whole world. Then it follows that those who believe in Jesus, who trust him with their lives and belong to him, are called to do incredible works of mercy and love in His name. Jesus said, "My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me."

But Jesus did not say it would be easy, that there would be no struggle. From where I sit this has been a particularly challenging week for those of us struggling to love our neighbors. Many of you have been personally involved in the events on Clemson's campus this week where many are working to create a space for voices to be heard, for the safety of people, for doing the hard work of living in a diverse community, and for wearing the mantle of leadership as administrators.

And earlier this week as a church, we listened to Bible Scholar the Rev. Dr. Rodney Sadler. He helped us see a different perspective than most of us have because our experiences are very different than his. In our evening classes, he challenged us as we wrestled with Scripture and how we can work for wholeness and reconciliation as followers of Jesus, the Good Shepherd. Jesus never said with would be without struggle.

And quietly this week, your Associate Pastor Nominating Committee has wrestled mightily and faithfully with their call to serve Fort Hill Church and Christ. And they continue to do so trusting the Spirit to guide them and to send the one who will join us as minister for youth and mission. Followers of Jesus are united in a common purpose.

Then in Guatemala our mission travelers including Beth Chapman and Susan Beckwith worked to relieve a little of the suffering at the one children's hospital in that country that serves the poorest of the poor. Followers of Jesus are united in a common purpose.

On Thursday some of us sat with our neighbors at the Islamic Center learning about our Muslim neighbors. It has been refreshing to learn we have more in common than the media would portray.

For me, it has been a gut-wrenching, challenging, emotional, and hopeful week, and perhaps for you. I have felt tested as I considered another's point of view. It is hard work to be follower of Jesus, the Good Shepherd. But I feel hopeful. When we seek to understand, to love another child of God, we grow to understand that we belong to the same God. The Holy Spirit encourages us, convicts us, and comforts us.

Jesus never said we will not endure struggle or suffering. In fact, he promised us we would when we take up a cross and follow him. Remember God hears everything. God alone is big enough, strong enough, and loving enough to hear it all and respond to it all. God alone can save. But followers of Jesus Christ are united in that same purpose of seeking first the kingdom of God. We do not have to fear struggle, for we trust in Him who is one with the Father. We have unity of purpose with Jesus. We belong to Him. We listen to his voice, not just believing in Him in our minds, but trusting Him in our hearts to lead us in the ways of life, eternal life, even on this side of heaven.

Our passage from Revelation begins,

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, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice, saying, "Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!"ⁱⁱⁱ

If that is what heaven is like, then we can work to bring a little bit of heaven on earth.

If heaven will be filled those of all tribes, peoples, nations, and languages, maybe we could be part of that kind of unity of purpose now, experience some of that salvation this side of heaven...

...until we all gather at the throne of grace, to honor, worship, love and serve God in eternal life together.

Let us pray: God of comfort and compassion,
through Jesus, your Son, you lead us
to the water of life and table of your bounty.
May we who have received
the tender love of our Good Shepherd
be strengthened by your grace
to care for your flock, all your children. Amen.

Benediction: Let us go forth to join Jesus Christ in his work and mission, bringing good news to the poor, blessing the children, teaching in word and deed, healing the sick, binding up the broken hearted, calling all to repent and believe in God.

Now may the love of God, the grace of our Lord Jesus, and the power of the Holy Spirit lead us forward.

ⁱ Scott Hoezee, Sermon Starters, Easter4C at [//cep.calvinseminary.edu](http://cep.calvinseminary.edu)

ⁱⁱ see the mission statement of Story Corps at [//storycorps.org/about/](http://storycorps.org/about/)

ⁱⁱⁱ Revelation 7:9-10