
The Importance of Being Earnest
Revelation 7:9-17
All Saints Day
Sermon preached by Rev. Jessica McCrae
1 November 2020

I know some people -- maybe you do, too -- whose first priority in life should be to re-arrange their bedroom furniture. What else could explain the fact that they permanently seem to have gotten up on the wrong side of the bed? It seems as if they misread the installation instructions on their beds and put them up wrong-side out.

Anybody here not know these people? They go through each day cranky and cantankerous, purveyors of doom and gloom. These are the folks that always know what new disaster has just struck, what local businesses are about to go bankrupt, whose marriages are on the rocks. They are the ones who always want to know what is wrong, why you look tired, why you seem out of sorts, even when you don't. They are the ones who want to find problems where none exist, for reasons known only to them. How could we survive life without these wrong-side-of-the-bedders? How could we get around without the black clouds and gloomy forecasts. Without wrong-side-of-the-bedders, we would never fully appreciate how miserable life really is.

The book of Revelation is often perceived as sharing that same sort of bleak perspective -- a wrong-side-of-the-bed vision foretelling pestilence, punishment, famine, death, destruction. But it really isn't. Not this part anyway. Here in today's text we are given celestial glimpses of glory. It is a little glimpse of what might it be like to join in God's reign and exist in God's peace. It really might just be one of the most beautiful passages in all of the New Testament. It is about us, you know, what things can be like for us, for all of us who have come out of this great ordeal, life divided, life distanced from God, life that has lost the plot; it is about what life can be like when everything and everyone is reconciled for good. The divisiveness of nationality and the prejudices that divide us, are forgotten as all peoples all come forward to praise God. There is one congregation, one church, and it joins all its separate voices together happily, in worship, in joy, in love. No one is stepping on anyone else's toes, no one is jostling to be first or in charge. Everyone is together. Happily, together. John saw this as the church of the future. John also saw this as our template for bringing the church to life in our own time.

And this is helpful for us today, living in these strange and exhausting pandemic times. You see today we are reminded that

instead of constantly worrying about how we will survive these days, the church is challenged by this vision in Revelation to live in earnest toward paradise. We have to be sensible, of course, but we have to remember, with faith, that we are a part of something bigger. THIS is not all there is, and we need to live in earnest toward that MORE that God promises us.

Now there's a word for you: "earnest." It's not a word used much in church nowadays, but it may be a word that the church needs to proclaim. The word has several meanings, one of course is a description for seriousness, for being focused on a task. But the other, lesser known meaning is as a noun, a foretaste of what is to come, a preview if you will of a promise to be fulfilled. That is what this text is calling us to be, calling our church to be, a preview of God's promises that will be fulfilled, a bit of a taste of heaven here on earth.

It is kind of like when a spindly little oak sapling is planted smack in the middle of a brand new bare backyard, it is an earnest of the future envisioned in that space. Someday the tree will grow to shade the yard with an enormous umbrella of green. Its sturdy branches will hold the tire swings and treehouse platforms for

children yet to be born. It will carpet the ground with its brilliant fallen leaves and feed a legion of squirrels with its annual crop of acorns. It might not look like much when it is planted, but the few spindly limbs of that sapling oak bear the weight of a tremendous earnest, knowledge of a tremendous promise or hope.

As Christians we are empowered by the Spirit of God to live this way; to live with our eyes on the promises that God is fulfilling, and also to live as part of that promise. We are called to help heaven come to earth, to live our life pointing to the incredible presence of God in our world. And today, consumed by anxiety and uncertainty, we are being prodded to ask ourselves whether we are being consumed by the world around us or whether we are able to muster our faith, in the midst of all this, to live our life in such a way that we are constantly pointing to God.

Because whatever else might be happening around us, we, through the love and grace of God, have the opportunity to be human conduits of the divine light that is God, offering others a little glimpse of the joy that awaits us; to be to be walking talking, light shining, peace making, justice seeking previews of God's love. Today is All Saint's Day, and for me that is what it means to take our place among

the communion of saints surrounding us – to live into our call to be bearers of light and hope and God’s love in this world, even when it is weighing heavy upon us, even when the challenges feel insurmountable, even when our little corner of the world feels a bit dark. Being a part of the communion of saints means remembering that no matter how tough things can get some days we are a part of something wonderful, something bigger than ourselves and that we are going to be a part of the change that this world of ours needs. That is what it means to be the body of Christ, being a part of something bigger than ourselves, anchored in Christ’s love, with the power and the wisdom to welcome God’s invitation to make changes to this world, through us.

Hopefully when you come to worship, when you log on and join this community you are reminded of that “being part of something bigger” feeling. You remember how lives are interconnected, how we are influenced and impacted by the actions and words of others, and how we can be an impact on them as well. Hopefully you are reminded, as you think about those saints in your life, whose paths have crossed your and encouraged you and inspired you, that our lives are all woven together in an intricate web of divine grace; held

together and strengthened by the love of God. These people, these saints, have shone a light for us, and now it is up to us to keep it burning.

And what does it mean to shine that light? Well, consider missionary physician Dr. Albert Schweitzer. He gave his life to serve the needs of those who lived in the African jungle. He was to the first half of the 20th century what Mother Teresa was to the second half. His life was devoted to protecting and healing lives and focusing on doing no harm in the process. He allegedly hung a lamp in front of his hospital that shone brilliantly throughout the jungle darkness and could be seen from quite a distance. The light literally became a beacon of hope and healing for the area's sick and dying. He is said to have hung a sign under the lamp that said:

"At whatever hour you come, you will find light, and hope and human kindness."

Both the sign and the lamp were "earnests" of Schweitzer's ministry. They were things that gave the people in need a little taste of the welcome, care and help that awaited them.

Schweitzer was not a naïve man and he lived his "earnestness" with full knowledge of how difficult and cruel the world can be, how cruel and broken people can be. But in the midst of all the challenges he was always able to stay focused on his faith, and his knowledge of God's love for this world. And so he lived absolutely determined that his life would point to heaven, to the promise of God's love, with every fiber of his being. No matter how challenging things became.

Being a person of faith does not mean being blind to the pain and suffering of this world, it does not mean putting a positive spin on everything, or ignoring the anxiety and uncertainty you are feeling. We are not at peace yet, and it is ok to acknowledge that. God's promises are not realized yet. But they will be. And so as people of faith we are called to do our best to not get bogged down in the problems and the fears and the brokenness of this world. We have to live in the midst of it, but we are called to do so living in ways that point to the promises of God, those promises that the passage from Revelation talks about in which everyone will walk together having come through the troubled times. In the midst of the brokenness and stress of this world, we are called to live in ways that point to hope and encourage hope to grow in the hearts of those around us. That

is what it means to shine a light. Keeping the faith in God's promises of new life coming out of death, light shining in darkness ... promises that God will unite us and guide us, help us knock down the walls that divide us and the ideologies that pit us against one another.

Suffering will end. This suffering will end.

We are living in times of tremendous division, much uncertainty and a lot of fear. But as people of faith, we are called to see beyond this present moment to the promises of God and we must work to help reveal this light and this hope and reflect it in our world every chance we get. Just as the saints of our faith who went before us worked toward making this real for us, we need to make it real for those around us now. No matter how dark it gets we need to live as though there is a sign just above us that says "At whatever hour you come, you will find light, and hope and human kindness."

Let us keep the faith, let us be kind, and on the most difficult days, let us go into the world in earnest, yearning for the kingdom of God, pointing to its inbreaking, confident of the love and power of God surrounding us. Thanks be to God.