

GOD'S FUTURE FOR THE HERE AND NOW

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

The odds of you winning the \$1.5 billion Powerball lottery jackpot in January were 1 in 292.2 million or .000000003422.

The odds of you being struck by lightning in a given year (based on reported injuries and deaths) are 1 in 1,190,000 or .0000008403.

The odds of you being attacked by a shark are 1 in 3,748,067 or .0000002668.

The odds of you going to heaven depend on whether you are talking about all people who have ever lived or just all Christians who have ever lived. In the case of all human beings who have ever lived, your odds are 144,000 in 108 billion or .000001333. If you calculate the odds in terms of all Christians, your odds are 144,000 in 13.5 billion or .00001066.

If you invest the \$2 cost of the Powerball ticket for 20 years at 6% interest, you'll earn \$4.40 interest, for a total of \$6.40, which is still a better return than odds of .000000003422.

As long as you use common sense and try to be safe, you might as well swim in the ocean or go about your daily business even when the weather is stormy. Chances are good you won't get attacked by a shark or struck by lightning.

But what about going to heaven? The minuscule odds are based on the number 144,000 in Revelation 7:4 and estimates of the total number of people who have lived in history and the total number of Christians who have lived since the first century A.D.

Actually, the odds of you going to heaven are really 0% — IF you go by the teachings of the Jehovah's Witnesses. The full number of 144,000 believers who go to heaven was calculated beginning with Pentecost in 33 A.D. and ending in 1935, when the full number was reached. Of course, you had to be a Jehovah's Witness in the first place to have any chance of being counted among the 144,000.

I say all of that with my tongue somewhat firmly planted in my cheek, but also for serious, theological reasons. How you understand and interpret the book of Revelation makes all the difference in the world. Obviously, you can interpret John's writing literally, which will lead you to conclude that only 144,000 believers go to heaven (interestingly and conveniently, people from your own group).

Or, you can read and interpret Revelation as a message written to give God's people hope and assurance "for the living of these days," whether those days were in the latter part of the first century A.D. or in April 2016.

Not to belabor the number 144,000, but Revelation is full of symbolism and numerology. How do you get 144,000? $12 \times 12 = 144$. 12 tribes of Israel \times 12 apostles =

144 x 1,000 (which in the Greek language/numerical system was a GREAT number). So 144,000 is a great, symbolic number — perhaps suggesting vastness and completeness.

But the 144,000 pales in comparison to what we read in Revelation 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. They cried out in a loud voice, saying, ‘Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!’”

When John received his revelation from the Lord on the island of Patmos, he “was in the spirit on the Lord’s day.” (Rev. 1:10) We take this to mean he was worshiping on the first day of the week, on Sunday. Throughout Revelation, John gives us glimpses of the worship going on in heaven (particularly in Revelation 4 & 5) while he is worshiping on Patmos.

Think about that! As we gather here this morning to worship God with our hymns and psalms and prayers and anthems and offerings and commitments, God is being worshiped by a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages. Did you read the margin note next to the Opening Sentences, from N.T. Wright, who is a noted New Testament scholar and the former bishop of Durham in the Church of England? “That is what worship is all about. It is the glad shout of praise that arises to God the creator and God the rescuer from the creation that recognizes its maker, the creation that acknowledges the triumph of Jesus the Lamb. That is the worship that is going on in heaven, in God’s dimension, all the time. ***The question we ought to be asking is how best we might join in.***”

Many people read Revelation as a “road map of the future.” They understand Revelation to be all about future events and the end times. Certainly there is a lot of “future tense” language in Revelation, but that future orientation was meant to help early Christians in the here and now as they tried to live faithful lives in the midst of trying times. The vision of “the way it will be” gave them assurance that the God they worshiped and served through Jesus Christ was trustworthy and able to follow through on his promises, not just in some far-away time and place, but right smack dab in the midst of their day-to-day struggles as Christians.

I’ve often said that I think corporate worship is one of the most important things — if not ***the*** most important thing we do as the Wallace Presbyterian Church. First, that’s why we were created — “to glorify God and to enjoy him forever.” Second, corporate worship reminds us (or should) that this Christian life isn’t just about “me and Jesus.” It’s not just about “getting myself to heaven.” Corporate worship reminds us that we are part of the body of Christ. Worship reminds us that even though God promises to know us each by name, God’s purposes are much bigger than our own, individual lives. God doesn’t need our worship, but we need to worship God. Finally, corporate worship reminds us of our calling as God’s people. It can’t be a coincidence that the word used for “worship” can also mean “serve.” We are not here this morning to enter-

tain or to be entertained, but to worship and serve our holy God, both in this sanctuary and beyond.

Let's go back to the future for a minute. Revelation does give us a vision of the future, but it's God's future that makes a difference in and determines our present. In a reflection on these verses which he called "Not Just About the Future," Eric Barreto writes, "Revelation is about God in the end. Revelation points us to a holy God who keeps promises, a God who ensures justice for the downtrodden and judgment against their oppressors. Revelation is about a God who creates the world and then sets it right again. Revelation is not about the destruction of the world but the way God will set it right again. In short, this book is not about us or what the future will hold as much as it is about a God in whom we can trust on our worst days as much as we can on our best days. . . Revelation is a book about today. Revelation is about the here and now. Revelation is about us, all of us, in this way. Here's why. When we imagine a world so transformed by God that an innumerable crowd of different people from different places speaking different languages gather together as one, we ought to be inspired to action, especially when that vision is so discordant with what we see in our everyday lives. But we ought to be moved not to will ourselves to become better people but to trust that God is already drawing us together, that God's promises are already made true even in a world that has stopped making sense. On the ground of God's promises, we cannot help but act and hope for something better."¹

If Revelation 7 gives us a glimpse of God's future that can and does shape our here and now, the verses which Lydia read from Paul's letter to the Galatians hold out that very vision for our life together as the body of Christ right now: "for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise." (Galatians 3:26-29)

As a worship leader on a weekly basis, sometimes it's hard to worship 100% on a Sunday morning. I find myself thinking about what's coming next in the order of service, thinking about who is in worship and who isn't and why, thinking about not dropping the communion plates of bread and trays of juice cups, thinking about what the children might ask me in the Children's Sermon, etc., etc.

So, as much as I love worshiping with all of you week in and week out, I also relish the times when I sit in the pew and worship. This happens most often at presbytery meetings. I sit in the congregation and lend my voice to the chorus of praise to God. I hear someone preach from the Word of God. I get to bow my head as someone else prays with and for me and the Church.

And I get to come to the table as a pilgrim and not as an administrator of the sacrament. In presbytery worship, we typically receive the bread and cup by going forward to tear a piece of bread and dip it in the cup. Because I like to sit near the front of the sanctuary, I get to watch my brothers and sisters come down the aisle to receive the

sacrament. There we are — not a great multitude that no one could count but, nevertheless, God’s people: young and old; black, white, Latino; ministers and elders; people standing straight and tall, people bent over; people holding out their hands in anticipation of receiving God’s grace. As I watch the people of God coming forward, I catch a glimpse of the great multitude standing before the throne and before the Lamb, singing, “Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever!” Then we all return to our seats and get on with the business of being the Church, the people of God. As we worship, we serve. As we serve, we worship. Then we leave our meeting place and return to our different congregations throughout southeastern North Carolina, having been reminded of the power and grace and mercy of our God who sits on the throne and who calls us his children.

There is great value and comfort in catching a glimpse of God’s future through John’s eyes in Revelation. But there is also a great value and comfort and calling for the here and now. The great multitude that no one could count standing before God’s throne and lifting their voices in praise inspires us to live into God’s future today as we worship and serve.

Let it be, Lord. Let it be.

Let us pray: O Living God of past and future, we praise you for this present moment. Fill us with your joy and empower us with your Holy Spirit, that our strength may be renewed to sing a new song of your glory in a world which longs for your justice and peace. All this we ask in the name of Jesus, in whom we become your new creation. Amen.

NOTES

¹Eric Barreto, “Not Just About the Future,” for April 17, 2016 at www.onscripture.com.