

***Psalm 23 (Congregational Hymn)***

***Revelation 7:9-17***

***May 12, 2019***

***Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC***

## **THE LAMB IS MY SHEPHERD**

***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.***

When I taught Introduction to New Testament at James Sprunt Community College and Mount Olive University, I told the students the same thing in every first class of the semester. As we reviewed the syllabus, I told them one of the questions on the final exam would be “List the books of the New Testament in order. Spelling counts.” The students had sixteen weeks to memorize the names of the twenty-seven New Testament books and how to spell them. At the first class, I would also tell them, “Philippians has one ‘l’ like my name ‘Philip’ and three ‘p’s.’ Don’t spell it with two ‘l’s.’ If you do, it will be marked wrong. Also, the name of the last book of the Bible is *Revelation*, not *Revelations*. If I find an ‘s’ on the end of Revelation, it will be marked wrong.” Take a guess which two books of the New Testament the students most often misspelled on the final exam!

The book of Revelation is just what it says it is – it is **a** revelation to John. Imagine you are sitting in an I-max theater, watching a movie on a big screen. That’s the impression you get from John’s description of what he saw and heard. The scenes flash by with vivid images and lots of action. They are interspersed with little intermissions, to give you the chance to catch your breath and think about what you have seen and heard. Today’s New Testament lesson is one such intermission. It comes between the opening of the first six seals by the Lamb in Chapter 6 and the opening of the seventh and final seal in Chapter 8.

Before we hear more about what goes on in the intermission of 7:9-17, let’s step back for a big picture view of the book of Revelation. This final book of the New Testament and the entire Bible may be the most misunderstood, misunderstood, and misused book of the Bible. Listen to how one blogger describes the whole revelation (by the way, I love the title of his blog – “No, It’s Not ‘Revelations,’ and It Is Not About That!” He begins his blog pointing out that in the first chapter, John is commanded, “Write what you have seen, what is, and what is to take place after this.” (Revelation 1:12-19)

Here's what he has to say: "And because of those words, 'what is to take place after this,' hundreds of kooks and mountebanks [I had to look up the definition of that word. It means: "a person who deceives others, especially in order to trick them out of their money; a charlatan." ] have had a go at 'what is to take place after this. . . anyone can have a go at what that 'after this' might mean. Let me be as clear as I can be about all this nonsense: it is just that – nonsense. Revelation is most assuredly not about Russia and China, the European Common Market, the selling tags on Proctor and Gamble soap products, the Rapture at the end of days, the saving of the few and the damnation of the many, the need for the state of Israel to exist in order to ensure that when Jesus returns to Jerusalem there will be some Jews who will either choose to become Christians or will join all unbelieving Christians and others (a short list includes Roman Catholics, Methodist, Presbyterians, Disciples of Christ, Mormons, all Muslims, Buddhists, Sikhs, etc., etc., some three billion or so of the world's people) in the lake of fire while the chosen few thousand will sing loud hymns of praise while they watch their fellow human beings writhe in agony for all eternity." The blogger comments that if you think this description is a caricature of how some people interpret Revelation, all you have to do is turn on the TV and watch some more famous preachers.

Well, if that's not what Revelation is all about, what does it mean? I like the blogger's description, I guess because I happen to agree with him. I also think he is right when he says, "Revelation is in fact about one thing: God wins and the powers of evil lose. And at the end of all things, God will make 'all things new,' not 'all new things.' In short, the world will eventually be what God had in mind for it at the very beginning, a place of order, structure, design, a place ruled by love."<sup>1</sup>

When I teach about Revelation, I begin by asking folks to make a list of what comes to mind when they hear the word "Revelation." Inevitably, the list (which can be quite long) is primarily made up of frightening images such as the beast, 666, fire, damnation, judgment, etc., etc. So, it comes as a surprise to people when I ask them, "Have you ever thought of Revelation as a book of hope?" Before you come to any of the "scary" stuff in Revelation, you read chapters 4 & 5, which describe God sitting on his heavenly throne and the Lamb standing next to God. The elders and the saints, the myriads of myriads, thousands of thousands, sing Hymn #1, "Holy, Holy, Holy! Lord God Almighty!" Every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, sing, "To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and

glory and might forever and ever!” And all creatures, great and small, bow down and worship God. . .

. . . which sounds a lot like the worship described in our Revelation reading this morning: “Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!” The 19<sup>th</sup> century poet Robert Browning wrote a poem called “Pippa’s Song,” which goes like this: “The year’s at the spring, and day’s at the morn; Morning’s at seven; The hill-side’s dew-pearl’d; The lark’s on the wing; The snail’s on the thorn; God’s in His heaven – All’s right with the world!”

Is that how life feels to you? That God’s in His heaven – All’s right with the world? Or is Revelation 7 (along with the other descriptions of heavenly worship) just a mockery of the reality of our lives down here on earth? How can there be rejoicing in heaven when there is so much pain and suffering on earth?

As I was reading for this sermon, I came across the powerful story of the Coventry Cathedral in England. Actually, there have been three Coventry Cathedrals over the years: the 12<sup>th</sup> century Priory Church of St. Mary; the medieval Parish Church Cathedral of St. Michael, and the modern Coventry Cathedral of St. Michael. The contemporary cathedral was rebuilt after the massive bombing with incendiary devices by the German Luftwaffe during the night of November 14, 1940. According to the cathedral’s website, “The decision to rebuild the cathedral was taken the morning after its destruction. Rebuilding would not be an act of defiance, but rather a sign of faith, trust and hope for the future of the world.” In the aftermath of the horrific destruction of war, the cathedral adopted its Ministry of Peace and Reconciliation.

Perhaps some of you have seen the modern Coventry Cathedral. Again, according to the history on the website, “Shortly after the destruction, the cathedral stonemason, Jock Forbes, noticed that two of the charred medieval roof timbers had fallen in the shape of a cross. He set them up in the ruins where they were later placed on an altar of rubble with the moving words ‘Father Forgive’ inscribed in the Sanctuary wall. Another cross was fashioned from three medieval nails by local priest, the Reverend Arthur Wales. The Cross of Nails has become the symbol of Coventry’s ministry of reconciliation.”

The cathedral’s bold message of life from death, of peace and reconciliation is evident in the rebuilding of the cathedral. The bombed-out ruins were left in place, and the new cathedral was attached to the ruins. The West Entrance to the rebuilt cathedral includes a 70-foot high by 45-foot wide glass window that was engraved by New Zealand born glass artist

John Hutton. Sixty-six etched figures adorn the glass panels, including dancing, rejoicing angels. Apparently, the artist showed the bishop two designs – one with dancing angels, one without. The bishop immediately chose the dancing angels.

The decision to include the dancing angels was not without controversy and criticism. Some critics thought it was inappropriate to show angels dancing and rejoicing in the presence of such destruction and in the face of ongoing suffering in the world. But proponents and supporters of the dancing angels argued they represent the hope God offers us in Jesus Christ in the face of and in the midst of the ongoing struggles and suffering in this earthly life. In his 2014 Easter evening sermon, the Dean of Coventry Cathedral said, “I’ve been pondering the West screen through the last days of Holy week, and early this morning (very early!) I’ve been looking at those three rows of angels dancing, falling out of the frame in their exuberant blowing of their trumpets. They are dancing because love wins. In the midst of all the huge disasters that confront our planet, and fill the news, love wins. And every time that truth is made known, they dance again!”<sup>2</sup>

Rejoicing in heaven, dancing angels, and worship around the throne of God don’t ignore our plight as humans. The heavenly vision of God on His throne isn’t a mockery of the suffering and distress down below. Quite the opposite! In John’s vision he sees “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, [crying] out in a loud voice, ‘Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!’” (Rev. 7:9-10)

Who are the people in the great multitude that no one could number? The elder tells John, “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.” (Rev. 7:14) That’s who stands before the throne of God. That’s who worships God day and night. That’s who will hunger and thirst no more. That’s whose tears God will wipe away from their eyes. That’s whose Shepherd is the Lamb at the center of the throne.

So, when we say or sing, “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want... Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me, thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me,” we aren’t just hoping against hope, wishing things might get better someday. Instead, our worship reflects the worship around God’s throne. We praise God because of what he has done for us in raising Jesus Christ from the dead, and making the Lamb of God our Good Shepherd.

Today's closing hymn -- #299, You Servants of God, Your Master Proclaim – was written by Charles Wesley in 1744, a period of great turmoil, chaos, and persecution for the Wesleys and the Methodists. They were accused of treason and Charles' brother, John, was attacked by an officer of the law and a mob while preaching. According to the history of this hymn, "Not surprisingly, Charles penned some of his most powerful hymns during the 1740s. Fruits of adversity, these hymns were molded in the 'dark night of the soul,' leaving works of exquisite strength and substance. It is a call to courage, to stand and be counted, in a time of adversity. In 'Ye Servants of God,' Wesley provided a way for the persecuted Christians of the time to sing a hymn of praise amidst all the turmoil with the reminder of God's gift of salvation and love. This hymn provides a source of comfort and fortitude for those struggling and a reminder that God's never-ceasing and infinite love is the most important thing that will remain in the end."<sup>3</sup>

As we sing our final hymn today, listen for the echoes of Revelation 7 in Charles Wesley's hymns. When Revelation was written, it was "a call to courage, to stand and be counted, in a time of adversity." These words are still a call to courage, to stand and be counted, in a time of adversity. We can answer God's call with the assurance that God is in his heaven, and that the Lamb of God, his only Son our Shepherd, is with us through everything we go through in life.

On Easter Sunday 2014, the Dean of the Coventry Cathedral ended his evensong homily with these words: "How do you think [the truth that love wins] should be made known? I think it's made known whenever there is a word, or perhaps more appropriately, a touch of love. Stuff still happens in this world to make angels weep – but something else has happened which will ultimately transform all of that. And that makes them dance – this is a day for dancing with the angels.

What will you do this week to make Christ's love known, to make the angels dance?"<sup>4</sup>

***Let us pray: You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created. Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing! To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever! Amen.***

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>John Holbert, “No, It’s Not ‘Revelations,’ and It Is Not About That! Reflections on 7:9-17,” October 24, 2014 at [www.patheos.com](http://www.patheos.com).

<sup>2</sup>Information about the rebuilding of Coventry Cathedral was taken from “Our History” at [www.coventrycathedral.org.uk](http://www.coventrycathedral.org.uk).

Information about the etchings of John Hutton was taken from “Coventry Cathedral West Entrance Screen by John Hutton,” at [www.coventrysociety.org.uk](http://www.coventrysociety.org.uk).

The quote from the Dean of the Cathedral’s sermon was taken from John Witcombe, April 20, 2014, “Angels dancing,” at [www.coventrycathedral.org.uk](http://www.coventrycathedral.org.uk).

<sup>3</sup>Scott Scheetz, “History of Hymns: ‘Ye Servants of God,’” at [www.umcdiscipleship.org](http://www.umcdiscipleship.org).

<sup>4</sup>See above, last citation in #2.