

All Saints Sunday, November 5, 2023  
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
Pastor Lara Bhasin  
Revelation 7:9-17

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

“They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; 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.” (Rev. 7:16-17)

My text for this All Saints Sunday is this much beloved passage from Revelation. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Many a Christian has been comforted by this promise and this vision of the new heaven and the new earth that await us at the end of time. Christians suffering under the Roman persecutions took heart, perhaps the very Christians who are depicted in this scene all robed in white, who in John’s words have just come out of the “great ordeal.” But the suffering faithful of every time and every place have taken heart from this vision and have longed for that day when God will put a final end to all pain, sickness, sorrow, and death. We understand that Jesus told us that we would have to pick up our cross and carry it in this life, but we cling to His words in the Beatitudes; “rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven.”

Jesus never promises His followers an easy time or a trouble-free journey through life. What He does promise is that He will be at our side when we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, and He is even now preparing a place for us in Heaven. You could put it this way. What Jesus promises is a “happily ever after.”

That is the theme of my sermon today - happily ever after.

Fairytale endings are the stuff of cheesy Hollywood blockbusters and children’s bedtime stories, not the purview of sober-minded adults who live in the real world and watch cable news. Or so some people would like to tell us. But I stand by my theme. Our Lord makes a promise as clear as day. There is joy that awaits His saints such as we cannot even imagine. One of the clearest messages in all of Scripture is this; the story has a happy ending.

After all, our mission as the Church is to proclaim the Good News!

If you will forgive me for oversimplifying, I have noticed that there are

essentially two types of people who reject this good news. On the one hand are people who take offense at the Gospel. To acknowledge Jesus as Savior means to admit that you are a sinner. There are an awful lot of people for whom that is the chief stumbling block; they are convinced that they are basically pretty good people and they don't like all this business about confessing to being sinful and unclean. If they do believe in Heaven, they figure they can get there on their own. Others claim to be more offended by the exclusivity of Gospel truth claims. If Jesus is God Incarnate, then it simply makes no logical sense to believe that all religions are just different paths to the same God. That's an idea that makes a lot of modern people uncomfortable. These are stumbling blocks that we can address another time.

There is another type of unbeliever. There are folks who don't object to the basic message of Christianity, but they find it too good to be true. Some of these folks might agree with Karl Marx and think that religion is the opiate of the masses. It's all a bunch of superstition, but it makes you feel good and makes your earthly troubles easier to bear. Whether you find that a problem or not depends, I suppose, on whether or not you are trying to foment a revolution, but either way, this type of unbeliever faults Christianity for being too "pie in the sky."

But among those who think that the story of Jesus is too good to be true is a type that pulls at my heart. I have known a few of these types in my life, and I have run across many in my reading. Many of these are people who might have lost the faith they had as children, and they are wistful and maybe regretful about it, but they think that now they are too grown up for fairytales. Christianity can help with morals, and its rituals might be comforting to some, but really, the idea that God is going to put the world to right, that Jesus came to save mankind from its own wretchedness, that this violent, pain-filled, disease-plagued earth will be renewed and death will be no more? Well, that's just escapism, they say. That's just wishful thinking.

If anyone you know and love falls into this camp, or if you yourself have ever been troubled by doubt, by the fear that the Gospel is too good to be true, then this is what I want to say to you today. The Gospel is true *because* it is good! The goodness of the Creator, the goodness of the Savior, the beauty of the Triune God – they point to Truth so fundamental and profound it helps us make sense of this broken world and our place within Creation, if only we have eyes to see.

That is why John wrote Revelation, after all, to help us see.

Revelation is how we translate Apocalypse, as in the Apocalypse of John, and

despite all its modern connotations of catastrophe and the end of the world, what apocalypse really means is unveiling. Revelation reveals; it is apocalyptic because it is showing us something. And this passage of Revelation that we have before us today, this passage from chapter 9, shows us what it will look like when the promises that Jesus makes in the Beatitudes that we also read today are fulfilled.

I never cease to be amazed at the insight of the people who put together the lectionary.

When Jesus preached the Sermon on the Mount, that too was an apocalyptic act. He preached to those poor in spirit, pure in heart, the persecuted, the ones who thirsted for righteousness and longed for peace. The message of the world is that such people are benighted fools who don't know how things really work, but Jesus is saying that no, they have it right. It is not the strong and the violent and the unjust who will win the day, but the meek and the pure and the loving. That might have been hard to believe in Roman occupied Judea, just as hard as it for us today who so much as read the headlines, but the more we come to know and follow Jesus, the more we see that His story is the true one and all the other narratives are false.

Jesus preached of the Kingdom of Heaven. His hearers may have thought at first that He was a starry-eyed dreamer, because the only kingdoms they knew were filled with turmoil and run by men who took advantage of the poor and helpless. But they were instinctively attracted to the idea of this Kingdom of Heaven, and the more time they spent with Jesus, the more they came to see this other reality was possible and plausible. They saw how Jesus fit into and fulfilled the stories of the Jewish Scriptures, and later Gentiles would see how the teachings and the life of Jesus helped them make sense of things in ways that their myths and schools of philosophy never could. But they did not just see the world with new eyes; this apocalyptic unveiling also turns inward. The more time you spend in Jesus' presence, the more you see yourself in a new light, and the more you understand who you were meant to be.

This is true for us too. The closer we cling to Jesus, the more the world's illusions crumble before our eyes. The better we see.

I said that I would stand by my theme – happily ever after – and I meant it. Those who follow Jesus and put their trust in Him are destined for unending joy and eternal life. They are destined to stand before the throne of the Lamb and all their earthly sorrows will melt away.

How do I know this, though? How can I be so confident that the story ends this way? How do I know that this scene in Revelation points to an ultimate Reality and is not mere wishful imagination?

Because I, like you, believe in the Resurrection. And I, like you, have seen the power of the Resurrected Lord to transform the lives of those who believe in Him.

Picture in your mind those first followers of Christ, those saints who precede us by 2,000 years and in whose company we will someday find ourselves. They were thrilled by the beautiful things that Jesus taught them – that all men and women are made in God’s image, beloved of Him, and that their hard and seemingly insignificant lives had ultimate meaning. But then this Jesus was crucified and died the worst of all possible deaths: defeated, in agony, and alone. We can forgive them their temporary despair as they said to themselves, “it really was all too good to be true.”

Then three days passed.

After three days, the bombshell news spread like wildfire. The Lord is risen! Mary Magdalene saw Him. Peter and John saw Him. More and more people saw Him, spoke with Him, touched Him, and suddenly they see. Everything is coming together. Jesus was speaking the truth. The story He told and the promises He made are as trustworthy as they are beautiful. The Kingdom of God is real; it will triumph; they really will live happily ever after.

I don’t mean to be pat or to deny that the evil is real and life’s paths are paved with sorrow. But the happy ending of the historical Resurrection is so enormous it swallows up all grief and pain, even the pain of the Cross. It is not escapism or wishful thinking to point out what an extraordinary transformation the news of the Resurrection brought about in the world and the effect it had on those who believed.

The Resurrection has turned ordinary men and women into saints.

That, after all, is the miracle that we are celebrating today. The names that we will read out in the prayers are the names of the faithful among us who have died since last All Saints Day. They are people many of us knew, ordinary people who led ordinary lives, nice folks perhaps, but still sinners like the rest of us. Probably pretty unremarkable in the eyes of the world. But they put their faith in the Resurrected Lord.

Carl, Elida, Eduard, Blanche, Kathryn, Asta, Egon, Robert, Ernest, Zoila, David, Charles, Lucy, Bennett...

And look at them now!!

All Saints Day is a day of apocalyptic unveiling for us, as we peer through the curtain of eternity and see those brothers and sisters in their present state. There they are, all their tears now wiped away, clothed in white, with palm branches in their hands, singing and praising God. And I believe that they are calling also to us; "hold fast to Christ and our story will be your story too."

But this scene from John's Revelation is not the only unveiling. Every Sunday we celebrate another apocalyptic glimpse of our happily ever after when we come forward to the Lord's Table. Here we have a foretaste of the feast to come, when we will receive our inheritance with all the saints in light.

It's a sacrament and a promise and a dress rehearsal all in one.

Every Sunday, we get a sneak peak at how the story ends. It's a story we can hear again and again and never get enough of. It's the story that gives us life and hope and joy and strength. It's the story we have to keep on telling so that the heavenly throng keeps growing and growing. It's the story that ends happily ever after.

To the Author of this story, even Jesus Christ, be the glory, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit. Amen.