

# “Our Future?”

*Valley Presbyterian Church – April 25, 2010*

Fourth Sunday of Easter  
Rev. John Wahl

Psalm 23  
Revelation 7:7-19

“Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” We think of heaven as being a reality, a place, that may lie in our future but that is, at the same time, also a present reality. When we look at the visions of heaven that are provided for us in the book of Revelation, there is a strong continuity between what is described there and the stories and images of the Old Testament.

One of the strongest correlations that we can find is between these words and images of John the apocalyptic and the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. In both writings, God is described as present and active; alongside us, leading us and at the center of our being. Both writers portray God as a shepherd who offers guidance, peace, and sustenance. But, in both of these visions – from the Old and New Testaments – God restores to us that which has been lost; reconnects us to that which is most life-giving and life-affirming; and offers the promise of eternal companionship with our creator and Lord.

We imagine heaven as the time and place when and where our bodies will be restored, when we will be reunited with those we love, and when we will be freed from the physical, emotional, and spiritual pains of life on earth. We imagine the sights and sounds and smells of heaven – even beyond the greatest that we experience on earth; our loved ones are always with us, the flowers never fade, the music never stops, the best tee times are always available.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus describes heaven as the Father’s house which has many different rooms. Most of us like that image because it allows us to think that we will be able to decorate our room according to our own taste; and that we will be allowed to judiciously select our roommates. The author of Revelation, a different John, offers a vision for a different type of setting: he gives us a glimpse of a temple gathering where there are innumerable people present. They are gathered around a throne and the Lord – the Lamb of God – sits in the center. The people have been brought to heaven from earth in order to experience God’s salvation, and their focus is offering thanksgiving and praise to God. They are there to worship which, as this John says, means not just going to their private room, but living in community together, with a shared focus on God. And while this vision shows them bowing down and singing praises, surely we know – as the people of John’s own community would have known – that worship is not just

what happens in the gathering of the Temple, but to all things we do in thankful response to being brought into God's presence.

Have you ever thought about this word we use for what we do when we are in the presence of God? "Worship" comes from a word that we no longer use, "worthship" which is the act of offering to God that which God's worthiness demands. Thanks and praise are given to God because it is to the Lord that our thanks and praise truly belong: thanks for the joys of life, but also for the redemption that is promised us from the pains that also accompany us in life.

In this, the author's vision of worship in heaven, the multitude of saints that are gathered around the throne of God give worship to God not as we do on earth – asking and requesting – but simply reflecting on and praising God's saving love.<sup>1</sup> We are told that these saints are those that have been drawn to God after the great ordeal: sometimes called the great tribulation. Tribulation comes from an ancient word meaning "grinding" as in the grinding of wheat in order to make flour for bread. It means that those who are in heaven were during life on earth "ground down," afflicted by pain and loss, maybe even by persecution. Now, in heaven, they have been restored, redeemed, and brought into God's presence for eternity.

How are we to envision this multitude? We are told that they come from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages. It makes me think of stories I heard about last year's presidential inauguration which, especially for people of color, was such a momentous experience. But in the heavenly temple, everyone has a front row seat. It also brings to my mind the experiences of the Israelites in the wilderness, when this large number of people would – at times, at least – direct their attention towards Moses, God's spokesperson, who instructed them about how to live as a community of God's people.

It also makes me think of the multitudes who at times gathered around Jesus as he was teaching in the gospels. We are told at one point that there were five thousand men – not counting the women and children. This many come to see and listen to Jesus, who looks upon them with compassion for they are like sheep in need of a shepherd. When the hour grows late, Jesus instructs his disciples to give the people something to eat, and they bring to him the five loaves and two fish to share among them. But, before breaking the bread and fish, Jesus sits the people down, dividing them into groups numbering fifty or one hundred. In doing this, Jesus transformed the great multitude of people into these

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<sup>1</sup> Martha Greene, "Whitewash" in *Christian Century*, Oct. 9, 2002

communities in which they could be known and through which they could experience the miracle of sharing and abundance.

The multitude of the saints in heaven offer worship to God as a response to what they experience in God's presence. In John's vision, he can see that they are wearing robes that are white; clean because they have been washed in the blood of the Lamb. All the stains – whether from the sins they committed or the violence inflicted upon them – have been lifted away in this mystical laundering. This multitude wearing white-washed robes are waving palm branches: reminiscent of another crowd of people who welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem, saying “Hosanna, glory to the Lord, our King.”

John can also see that members of this community of the faithful in heaven have other reasons to worship God. We are told that they have shelter – none are displaced or homeless – and they experience neither hunger nor thirst. In this heavenly home, the multitudes are protected from the sun and from the heat. Then, in language which evokes the words of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, he is shown that the Lord serves as their shepherd, who will guide them to springs of life-giving water and wipe away every tear from their eyes.

Heaven, therefore, makes the most sense to those multitudes of people who are in need of shelter, food and water; those who suffer from heat and exhaustion; those who have tears to be wiped from their eyes. But, heaven is also for those who realize that they cannot achieve these things on their own; who have experienced injury and loss which cannot be healed or restored without God's saving grace. Heaven is for the faithful on earth who both work for and await for God's kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

Theodore Wardlaw writes that: “The church, at its best, helps us envision the future – even in the midst of the lives we're living now. Christian worship, when it is faithful, will always include some form of the prayer, “thy kingdom come.” When we offer worship that is “worthship,” it provides an encounter with God's future which is best made known through the imperative for changing the present.<sup>2</sup>

Just as Moses revealed God's commandments for life to the people of Israel in the wilderness, and just as Jesus divided the hungry multitudes into communities before the miraculous feeding of the five-thousand, so are the multitudes of Christ's followers on earth today divided into different communities of faith in order to experience God with one another. Within these congregations – separated by location and tradition, but united by a common faith in Christ and

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<sup>2</sup> Theodore Wardlaw, “Living in the Middle of Time”

commitment to follow God’s commandments – that we can hear and see these glimpses of heaven. A part of our job as the church is to proclaim the future that we cannot wholly define, and yet proclaim as true.

Dana Ferguson, a minister at Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago, tells about preparing for medical treatment after doctors discovered that she had cancer. She was told to gain as much weight as possible, and so she scanned the grocery shelves for the highest caloric foods that she could find, buying protein shakes and ice cream and King Don chocolate dessert cakes, a favorite from her childhood. At home, trying to force down more dessert cakes and washing them down with a powdery shake, she realized they were not as yummy as they had been during her childhood years. Yet, the doctors had told her that doing this would help see her through to the end. They would help to give her strength for the ordeal which lay ahead.<sup>3</sup>

Sometimes, what we do as the community of faith and the obstacles that we face as a particular congregation seem to be more work than we imagine it should. We can become disillusioned when we hear about clergy abuse of children, or about arguments and divisions which exists within and amongst churches. We may long for those days of childhood when believing in Christ and envisioning heaven seemed simple and pure. But we discover over time that we have ordeals to endure, and that the community of faith, in its worship and work, is God’s best prescription to prepare for what life may hand us.

John, writing to this community of Christians, gave them a gift. John pulled back the curtain that clouded their view of God’s great design – and our ultimate future – in order to show them a party going on in heaven – a party of people who, like themselves, had endured the great ordeal. Our future also belongs with God – the good shepherd who provides shelter and protects us from the heat, who guides us to green pastures and still waters; the God who restores our souls.

Our future rests in God’s hands, and so our present does as well. That is why we are called to worship – to proclaim God’s “worthship” in what we say and in what we do. AMEN.

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<sup>3</sup> Dana Ferguson in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, vol. 2