

“Our Greatest Hope”

Valley Presbyterian Church – November 1, 2009

All Saint's Day

Isaiah 25:1-9

Rev. John Wahl

Revelation 21:1-7

Christians are troubled by the Book of Revelation, and for a couple of good reasons. For one, there are the many ghastly stories and characters that are contained in the chapters of this book: the bloody battles, the anti-Christ, the four horsemen of the apocalypse, and the great sea monster. On any day other than Halloween, we don't enjoy being scared by things like this. In addition, many Christians are troubled by the ways that some others in our tradition interpret and extrapolate signs they see contained in John's visions for the future. When will these events happen? Who will be saved? Who will be made to suffer?

These fears cause many of us to look past Revelation and assume that because it is so hard to understand, it is not worth the effort needed to try and figure it out. And yet, it's important when we do look at Revelation to remember why it is such a crucial part of and conclusion to the New Testament. John of Patmos, who has been sent into exiled during a time of severe persecution, writes a letter to comfort seven churches that are also going through periods of persecution. He urges church members to “remain steadfast that despite all appearance to the contrary, the Roman Empire's power is not absolute; it is God who reigns supreme.”¹

Therefore, despite its many scary parts, Revelation is at its heart a book about hope, a vision of comfort for a people who are in distress. In today's reading, the vision of this new Jerusalem dazzles with imagery of renewal, beauty and comfort in times of suffering and grief. The holy city comes down out of heaven from God. It is a vision of the church at the end of time and yet, because it is part of the eternal – the beginning and the end – it is also present and available to us now.

¹ Ginger Grab in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, vol. 4

In Revelation, we have the promise of the New Jerusalem coming down from heaven as a bride, but the old Jerusalem is still very much with us. We have not yet endured every trial and tribulation, and yet the hope that we have for a redeemed world has already started to become a reality. Jesus announced that in his coming, the reign of God is among us and that, through him, God has come to dwell among us. Therefore, all of society, and all human institutions, are simultaneously created, fallen and redeemed. In other words, they at times may fulfill the purpose for which they were created, just as we are – as Martin Luther taught – simultaneously both sinners and saints: created in the image of God, separated from God by our sin, and reunited with God through Christ.

And so, our greatest hope is that we can one day return to the same state for which we were created: a close relationship with God. In the Old Testament, the prophet Micah reminds us that God has told us what is good: do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God. Our time on earth is much like an engagement as we come to better know God and prepare for what is like a marriage union with God. We are instructed to put on our wedding clothes and prepare for the arrival of the bride. We are told to live as a church community that will be receptive to God who will dwell among us; who will wipe away our tears; who will relieve us from pain and mourning and crying; a God who will make all things new.

Last week, I was listening to a morning radio show when a woman called in and shared her frustration about not being able to find the right Halloween costume. She had – as she told the radio hosts – been invited to a Halloween wedding, expected to come to the ceremony dressed in costume. When she went out to look at the Halloween costumes available in stores, she found the selections either too revealing and inappropriate or too morbid and gruesome to fit the occasion.

For me, a Halloween-themed wedding is fraught with problems. Already, there are too many potential distractions that detract from the sanctity and hopefulness of a wedding without having ghosts and goblins dancing to *The Monster Mash* at a reception. But, this woman's clothing dilemma caused me to think about the holy wedding story in Revelation, "the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband." What are, for this church and for the church universal, the wedding clothes that we adorn as we await God's coming? What are the things that we choose to do; where do we place our hope, as we

anticipate our return to God as the redemption of the world that John of Patmos envisioned?

Over the past few weeks, your church leaders have been trying to summarize for you what we – as a church – have been planning and preparing for the coming year. You have heard about plans to hire a Christian Educator to the church staff; how we hope to increase our impact through mission and outreach, how we want to be good stewards of our buildings and grounds. Hopefully, you have been reminded what an impact that this church has made in the lives of people in the congregation and the community: how at least ten members of this church have become ordained ministers; how this church has taught the traditions to hundreds of children; how we have met the physical and spiritual needs of countless people; how so many have been comforted in their times of pain and grief through the ministry of the church.

Next Sunday, we will be dedicating the pledges that members of this church make to support the mission and ministry of Valley Presbyterian for the upcoming year. Your church leaders have provided you with information about both our budget needs as well as the hopes we have for developing and expanding the future works of the church. This is a church that pledges and fulfills its pledges at a very high rate. That displays a strong faithfulness and commitment level, which is something to celebrate.

And yet, I would encourage you to also view your financial commitment to the church as a spiritual exercise. A pledge is a statement of belief that God truly does reign – now and, as we hope, increasingly in future days. We are instructed by scripture to give our gifts as a thankful response for all that God has done for us, but also as a sign of hope that God is indeed coming closer to us as our relationship grows closer to God. And while the tithe stands as the biblical example of setting aside and returning a portion of our blessings back to God, our offerings are also intended to be living and evolving signs of our commitment.

Scripture also teaches us to give freely – voluntarily – and not from compulsion, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God. When I came to Valley in March of last year, I discerned that what I could freely give was less than what I would ultimately like to give, and that God through the church had blessed me with the option to set both my present level of giving and what would ultimately be my giving goal. Last year, I chose to turn over five

percent of my income, and keep my eyes open for extra giving opportunities. This year, I decided on six percent and hope next year to make it seven. I share this with you not because it ought to be your rule for giving, but because I view it as a sign of the way that God is growing within me. No matter what I give, I offer it because of the freedom that, through Christ, God has already given to me. Giving at a different level will not earn anything for me in God's eyes, for God has already given everything: God is the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last – loving us fully from the moment of our birth; loving us enough to give us Jesus, the Son, who offered himself completely and freely. In Christ is our greatest hope, the hope of God's continued and growing presence in our lives, in our midst. It is like a bride coming down the aisle: as our anticipation for a life together with God grows and grows, so does our thankfulness for the blessings that God has given and promises that are still to come.

We approach the table this morning, on All Saint's Day, remembering the many people of faith that God has put in our lives throughout the generations; and remembering that Christ has come, and continues to come, and will again come, to dwell among us. All thanks to God. AMEN.