

“A Faith We Are Wiling to Live For”  
Revelation 7:9-17  
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As you well know by now, I like to preach from the lectionary, the suggested three-year cycle of biblical texts designed to take the church through most of the Bible. The lectionary takes us into parts of the Bible we might ordinarily choose to ignore. Like the Book of Revelation. But the downside to following the lectionary is that it limits us to those passages included in the lectionary, many of which favor the kinder, gentler parts of the Bible. Indeed, you will be interested to note that of the more than 624 passages of Scripture used in the three year cycle, only three of them are from the book of Revelation, and all of those deal with the subject of worship in the heavenly realm. Outside the scope of the lectionary lie most of the fire and brimstone passages we usually associate with the book of Revelation.

If we had read a little earlier in the book, we would have learned that reason for the great worshiping in heaven described in Revelation was the worthiness of the Lamb, the lamb who could open the scroll that John saw in the right hand of the one seated on the heavenly throne. We would have seen four strange but living creatures, and 24 Elders robed in white, and myriads of myriads, worship with all their might, showing us something of what true worship is all about. We would have been terrified by the opening of six of the seven seals on the scroll in the

hands of the one seated on the throne, a scroll that does not contain a lot of good news, at least not in the traditional sense, for as the first four of the scroll's seven seals are opened, the well-known Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse appear and are granted dominion over the earth with authority to conquer, and kill, and take no prisoners. God's judgment has been unleashed upon the earth. As I said, not exactly good news as we have come to expect it from our Bible. As the seal on the fifth scroll is broken, John sees under the heavenly altar an untold number of the souls of those who had been slaughtered for the word of God and for the testimony they had been given. They cry out for justice, waiting for God to avenge their deaths. And then the earth comes apart at the seams when the sixth seal is broken: earthquakes strike, the sun goes dark, the moon becomes as blood, the stars fall from the heavens like well-ripened fruit, even the sky vanishes, and all the people of the world tremble in fear at what might come next, and the stage is set for the opening of the seventh seal, the seal which just may unleash the end of the end: and then there is a pause, a break in the action, a moment of hope in the midst of chaos. And John hears that twelve thousand members of each of the tribes of Israel have been sealed, marked with the name of the Lamb and with the name of God, and saved for their blamelessness and purity. And then, this is what John records next: (Read 7:9-17).

Let me begin this evening with the nineteenth century French poet, Charles Baudelaire, who not only translated the works of Edgar Allen Poe into French but

who fancied himself a literary kindred spirit with Poe. Baudelaire wrote a series of prose poems in the years shortly before his death and in these poems, he reflected on both the rise of the age of modernity and on his own miserable and melancholy life. His story, “The Soup and the Clouds,” is both short and worth reading aloud as we think this morning about “that multitude that no one could count...those who have come out of the great ordeal...who have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the lamb.” This is what he writes:

“My dear little mad beloved was serving my dinner, and I was looking out of the open dining-room window contemplating those moving architectural marvels that God constructs out of mist, edifices of the impalpable. And as I looked, I was saying to myself: “All those phantasmagoria are almost as beautiful as my beloved’s beautiful eyes, as the green eyes of my mad monstrous little beloved.”

All of a sudden I felt a terrible blow of a fist on my back, and heard a husky and charming voice, an hysterical voice, a hoarse brandy voice, the voice of my dear beloved, saying: “Aren’t you ever going to eat your soup, you good-for-nothing cloud-monger?”

Quite a rude awakening from a pleasant dream, wouldn’t you say? A reverie interrupted by violence, a comedown from a high place, and precisely what is happening in this section of the book of Revelation. The glorious picture of heaven is blown away by the violence of God’s judgment as the seals are opened. The

glimpse we receive of heaven is sweet but real life intrudes upon fantasy; there is hell to pay for following Jesus and John is about to tell us what it looks like.

As beautiful as are the images in today's passage, there is a hint of the ugliness with which much of the book of Revelation is concerned. As we heard, one of the elders asks John from where have this great multitude dressed in white come, and then he answers his own question: they are those "who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the lamb." In other words, they are those who have persevered in the faith, who have lived their lives in such a way that they have drawn the ire of the powers that be. They are different, with different customs and a different take on the whole empire thing. At first, they were just considered fringe element Jews who followed a specific teacher, some local idiot savant named Jesus. But when they began to distinguish themselves from the rest of Judaism, these "Christians" lost their status as a protected religion and were fair game for scapegoating and persecution. It became "Blame the Christians first, ask questions later." The age of the martyrs is replete with stories of the faithful who, rather than deny Christ as Peter did those three famous times, faced the full force of the Empire and met their demise at the hands of the executioner or in the jaws of a lion. And so it was to the faithful who would face these ordeals in the coming years that this seventh chapter of Revelation would speak loudly and clearly. It will be tough, but in the end, God will comfort you and take care of you forever.

To give you an idea about what the faithful faced, consider this story of a martyrdom about which we know much more. In the year 203, a well-to-do mother named Perpetua was arrested with several others, including a pregnant slave girl named Felicitas, for practicing the Christian faith. After describing her arrest, her subsequent baptism, and her family's initial attempts to persuade her to recant her faith, this is what Perpetua had to say when it came time to make the final decision: "We were placed on a sort of platform before the judge, who was Hilarion, procurator of the province...The others were questioned before me and confessed their faith. But when it came to my turn, my father appeared with my child, and drawing me down the steps, besought me, 'Have pity on the child.' The judge Hilarion joined with my father and said: 'Spare your father's white hairs. Spare the tender years of your child. Offer sacrifice to the prosperity of the emperors.' I replied, 'No.' 'Are you a Christian?' asked Hilarion, and I answered, "yes, I am.' The judge then passed sentence on all of us and condemned us to the wild beasts, and in great joy we returned to our prison."

A few days later, Perpetua and Felicitas and their companions were taken to the amphitheater where each met their untimely demise at the claws and jaws of wild beasts. Perpetua and Felicitas were run down by a mad heifer, but since they survived two attacks by the beast, they were led out to be killed by the gladiators. Legend has it that Perpetua's faith was so evident that she affected the executioner to such a great extent that she herself had to guide the sword to her throat so that

the poor man could carry out his duty. Saints Perpetua and Felicitas and their companions were subsequently canonized and their Feast day is celebrated on March 6. It is perhaps somewhat ironic, or maybe just appropriate, that their names, joined together throughout history, and translated from the Latin, mean Perpetual Happiness.

Boy, those were the good old days, weren't they, when a believer could be led to death by heifer "in great joy." In fact, I believe we have a dairy farmer in this congregation who could provide a heifer or two if there is anyone who'd like to prove their worthiness and faith in Jesus Christ. Are there any takers? C'mon, now, doesn't that sound like a formula for perpetual happiness? Is martyrdom the ultimate expression of faith? Is willingness to die for the sake of Jesus Christ the pinnacle of the Christian life? To tell you the truth, I think martyrdom is the easy way out, for it is a lot harder to remain faithful for a lifetime, to be consistently faithful from beginning to end, through thick and thin and through good times and bad, than it is for that one moment even when your life is on the line. This is not to take anything away from the martyrs, who probably wouldn't have been able to confess in the face of death without a lifetime of faithfulness, but maybe there is something harder to do than die. And that something is to live.

There may indeed be a place for martyrs even in this day and age, but I for one hope it is not my fate. And though not everyone is called to be a martyr, we have something in common with them. We are called to persevere in the faith, to

be willing to make faith a way of life. This is our calling: read the Gospels, read Paul, read this chapter of Revelation, it's all about perseverance, and it's not easy. But time and time again in Scripture and even today in our passage, it is promised to those who persevere "They will hunger no more, and thirst no more...and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes." Fear not, there is hope for those who persevere. But if martyrdom is no longer fashionable, what are we to do today to demonstrate our capacity for perseverance? I want to suggest to you that the 21<sup>st</sup> century counterparts to those who were willing to lay down their lives for the sake of Jesus Christ, are those who are willing to change their lives for the sake of Christ, because if there is anything more terrifying than facing the executioner's blade, it is the prospect of changing oneself.

Sister Bridget McKeever is a nun in Indiana. The way she tells her story, she was about to be off to a parish Christmas party on December 23 one year, when she was summoned by a phone call to a part of town she had never been to, to the poor Hispanic section, to be specific. She was summoned there by a family grieving the loss of their three year old son, run over by a truck while he was out picking up recyclables with his father. Sister Bridget was given unquestioned access to this family's grief because she was a religious person, and so, as a nun, she entered their home and offered what pastoral care she was able, and she saw the conditions in which this family lived: in a two-room shack, with children sleeping on the floor, the only employment a housecleaning job for the mother and

trash picking for the father. Sr. Bridget did her best to comfort this family in their hour of need, and she did it very well; they were very grateful. She even mobilized the parish to respond to this tragedy as only a church community can do — with food and clothing to overflowing, and with Christmas gifts for the rest of the children. They even got the local funeral home to donate the casket and the burial services, and the church was packed for the memorial funeral mass. And then they all went home. Sr. Bridget continued to visit the family for a while but finally she too stopped going and the family of the little boy went on living their difficult lives.

Sr. Bridget is haunted by the episode now years later, feeling guilt and futility over the way she handled the situation. I offer you her own words to conclude her story: “When I scrutinize my guilt, I believe that it arises from my failure to examine and address the causes of the tragedy. The futility [I feel] comes from the feeling that my intervention changed nothing. It gave the impression that people cared, but I, and the whole community, only cared to the point where we could respond without changing. We did not want to change, and we left the family as we had found them — powerless in an overwhelming and oppressive system.” Listen again to the heart of it: “It gave the impression that people cared, but I and the whole community only cared to the point where we could respond without changing. We did not want to change.”

Friends, we are called to faith as a way of life, which means not only that we must be flexible enough to change when change is forced upon us, and not only that we must always remain open to the possibility of change, but also that change is what we must actively seek out, and embrace, and lay claim to as a foundation of our faith. Our faith must do more than give the impression that we care, it must demonstrate it. Our faith must do more than have a name, it must have a content. Our faith must be something we are willing to live for as well as something we are willing to die for. It may sound paradoxical, but “faith as a way of life” is simultaneously the easiest thing and the hardest thing we are called to do. On the one hand, all we need to do is let our faith be reflected in the way we live our lives and we’ve got it made. But on the other hand, all we need to do is let our faith be reflected in the way we live our lives and we’ve got it made. You heard me right. They are the same thing. Nothing could be easier or harder than that.

Allow me to give you a final example. One evening a few years ago in Minnesota, Flora and I participated in the local celebration of Take Back the Night, a national event to end violence against women. Despite reports in the local press that a mere two hundred people participated, all 500 or more of us marched from a local park, through downtown, past the big granite church on Fourth Avenue of which I was the pastor, and back to campus, waving banners and signs, chanting slogans and sayings, and doing our best to draw attention to a social sin that affects each one of us in ways we can only begin to imagine. And all along the parade

route, people emerged from homes and apartments and businesses to see what the commotion was about. They could hear what we were shouting and they could see that we were about something just and good and righteous. But to my knowledge, not a single one of the people standing in yards and doorways or looking down from windows or balconies, not a single one joined the march. Not women, not men, not students, not parents. Nobody else joined the parade. How easy would it be to join a simple parade. How difficult it must have been to join a simple parade. All we need to do is let our faith be reflected in the way we live our lives and we've got it made. All we need to do is seek out and embrace change. All we need to do is persevere. Are you up for the challenge? Are we up for the challenge? Are we ready to appreciate the one who is serving us our soup instead of gazing into the clouds and fantasizing about her? Amen.