

November 1, 2020
All Saints Day
Year A
Revelation 7:9-17
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA
Zoom Worship during the Coronavirus Pandemic
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Glimpses of the Past, Visions of the Future

I can almost see them. Huddled together hoping that no one noticed them walking early through the streets of Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, or Laodicea. All places in Asia Minor in the ancient world. All places, cities, towns, and provinces, mentioned in the book of Revelation, which was really a letter; a letter from the pastor and prophet John, who had been exiled to the island of Patmos for his Christian activities to the churches that he had likely served as missionary or preacher or pastor.

I picture them gathered on a Sunday morning, early, before the streets filled with people going to work or doing their shopping or visiting their friends, in the home of one of the wealthier members of the church in their town. I see them gathered and hoping that they would not hear a knock on the door, some official asking what they were doing, why they were singing. Asking why there were enslaved people there, sitting side by side with free people, asking why the women were mixing with the men.

It was illegal to worship Jesus Christ in the Roman Empire in those days, so it was always a risk to gather for worship. They had known people, friends, other members of the body of Christ in their cities, towns, and regions, who had been caught, who had been arrested, who had lost homes, businesses, family relationships. John had been exiled. Some even had friends or family members who had been killed for their allegiance to Christ.

Some believed that those days were coming back, another great persecution of the church. The Emperor, Domitian, who demanded that he be worshiped as a God, who demanded sacrifices made to his name, who called himself Lord, who marched in procession and expected people who to bow down to him as a god, had had people executed for refusing to worship him and the Roman gods.

They knew that they were taking a chance by worshiping Jesus. They knew that someday there might be a knock on their door, that they might be given a choice between saying the simple words, *Kurios Kaisaros*, “Caesar is Lord” and by saying them, deny the Lordship of Jesus, or losing everything, including their lives.

They had heard stories, maybe they had even known people who had been given that choice. People who had chosen, instead, to say “Jesus is Lord” and who had indeed lost property and businesses, who had been shunned by their own families because of that confession. They had known people who had died and people who had simply never been seen again.

They had known people who had made the other choice, who had made the confession *Kurios Kaisaros*, who had sacrificed to the emperor, and perhaps they wondered how those people should be treated, if they ever came again, to eat at the table, to sing and pray, and to hear the stories they had failed to trust in when the time of trial came.

So, they gathered, in the early mornings of quiet Sundays. They sat together, forgetful of status or rank in their society, they sang songs, they prayed to the one who had healed the sick and fed the hungry, they listened to letters from the long dead apostles and from Paul, from the missionaries and pastors and teachers of their day who were traveling the Roman roads keeping the churches connected sharing news and words of inspiration and encouragement. They listened to the ancient words of the Jewish people found in their scriptures and saw how those stories continued in Jesus Christ and in the church. They shared from their abundance or from their poverty. They ate a meal together, and, when the bread was broken and

the wine was poured, they remembered Jesus and they knew that he was with them.

When they left their Sunday gatherings, I can imagine them leaving the house where they had worshiped in small groups, hoping not to attract anyone's notice, with a large group leaving the house at one time. So, as they slipped away from the place where they had worshiped, bidding their hosts, the peace of the Lord be with you and promising to be there the next Sunday, as they left, outwardly at least, they probably they slipped back into their public roles.

A woman who had preached and prophesied at the gathering, might have returned home to her husband and children, to demurely support her husband's career. But maybe when she was putting her children to bed she told them the stories that she had heard about Jesus' miracles, or about dry bones living again, or about waters parting, or about walls falling down, or apostles giving people the ability to walk again and pictured the day when her children, and maybe even her husband would be able to join her as the feast of Jesus.

A man who had blessed and broken the bread and shared the wine might have gone back to his home to keep the books or to work in the home of someone who called himself his master. But he knew that Jesus was his true master, the one who owned him and who set him free, and maybe he told others about the liberation that he had found in Jesus.

But still, no matter how much they looked like everything was the same for them outwardly, the same roles, the same positions in society that they had had before they became Christians, their hearts were changed by the time that they spent together and in the presence of God. They forgave more freely, they worked for justice more boldly, they gave more generously, they lived in peace.

It was hard times for many in the Roman Empire. The Roman legions had suffered a traumatic defeat, the first of its kind, at the hands of the white horsed Parthians on their Eastern border, and that defeat was remembered well by many.

Major wars had been fought to quell rebellions within the Roman Empire. The Pax Romana was not as peaceful or effective as it once had been.

There had been political upheaval in the Empire, with the destructive reign of Nero, followed by three emperors in three years.

There had been natural disasters in their lifetimes, earthquakes, and volcanoes, and they could all remember the famine that caused food shortages as far as Rome. Things just didn't seem as stable as they once had.

But one Sunday, those who gathered to worship Jesus, after they greeted those who were present and checked in on those who were missing, after they sang and prayed, they got to read a new letter, from John, who they had known before he had been exiled to the island of Patmos. And in this letter, twenty-two chapters, which they would have listened to in its entirety on one Sunday morning, they heard visions to inspire, terrify, challenge, and thrill. They heard words to encourage and words to admonish, and through it all, they found a thread of glory, a thread of hope, that sustained them from vision to vision that left them no doubt about the seriousness of faith or about the sinfulness of the world or about the righteousness of God.

This is not an easy time for us. So much about our life is in flux. We are coming to the end of a tumultuous election season. We are in the grip of a pandemic that is getting worse and worse and which has already cost us so much. We are worshiping in our own home churches, separated by disease, grateful to the technology that makes it possible for us to be together, and yet, at the same time, still resentful of it, because it is not what we want, what we yearn for; human contact, songs that we can sing together, hugs and spontaneous conversation, coffee and laughter, people gathered around tables in Kask Hall pinning quilts together, children grabbing cookies before Sunday School, things we might have taken for granted a year ago today, that now feel like gifts we never treasured enough. And

today, on All Saints Day, perhaps the thing that we yearn for the most is all of our beloved ones together again.

Like those early Christians, back in the 90s, not the 1990s, just the actual first century 90s, who had things to worry about and a society that seemed to be destabilizing around them, who had friends and family members who they missed, who they mourned for, whose life and whose faithful deaths, bore witness to the truth of the gospel, we have the gift of John's words. He was separated from the community that he loved. He was only able to reach them through the medium of the technology of his day. He had an openness to the Holy Spirit and he had papyrus and a quill, so he was able to share his visions with the churches he loved, and missed and worried about and prayed for.

And he was able to give them a vision of their beloved dead that he had received from Christ, a vision that gave them hope and that they preserved and passed down to give hope and encouragement to those who would come after them. And today, on this All Saints Day, 2020, in a year, when there has been so much death, so much loss, so much grief, and when there are still so many questions, that vision does just that. It gives us hope and encouragement, because through John's words, we get to see a vision of the saints, a great multitude, people from everywhere, from all nations, and all peoples and all tribes, speaking all languages, gathered around the throne of God, worshiping God and the Lamb of God, who meets us in communion and who takes away the sin of the world.

We see them, healed and whole. We hear their triumphant shout, their affirmation of faith, "Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!"

And for us, who knew them, who loved them, and who perhaps, knew their sufferings in their final earthly days, we hear the promise:

They are with God. They are sheltered, they will hunger no more, and thirst no more, they will suffer no more, the Lord is their shepherd, they drink of

the water of life, and their tears of grief, of pain, of suffering have been wiped away.

These are words, words of a prophet to the churches, the people that he loved, the people who he knew were grieving, who he knew were wondering what it truly meant to be a Christian during troubled times, are words that we can embrace for ourselves, today, when we remember our own saints; as we remember what they meant to us in our lives, as we celebrate their time with us, and as we think about the stories they told and the stories that they live and the examples that they set. These are words that come to us to pull back the veil of heaven during our own troubled times, to fill our eyes with glory and our ears with singing, and our hearts with hope. Our beloved dead are with God. They are safe and held and loved and filled with joy. And we will see them again. Thanks be to God. Amen.