

A Sermon for DaySpring

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God's Intervening Hope

Revelation 7:9-17

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The vision of heaven we hear in our Epistle reading is very beautiful: The Lord, goodness, tenderness, love in intimate kindness. All of this awaits us. Those who have gone before us and died in the Lord are there. They proclaim that they are not saved by their good works, though many good works they surely have done, but that they have been saved by the Lord, "Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne and to the Lamb!" it is he who saves us. It is he who takes us by the hand and brings us safely home where our ancestors are and welcome us to join their unending praise.

This vision is beautiful because it is a vision of hope. Not little hope, not partial hope, but majestic, ultimate hope in the face of despair. We can only realize the beauty of this vision when we know the kind of suffering into which it shines as a beacon of hope. Some of us do.

The Lamb is Jesus. The Bible has many images of Jesus: light, vine, bread, king, priest, shepherd. The favorite of Revelation is Jesus as the Lamb, the lamb who was slain. This is an image from the Passover lamb of Jewish ritual, the lamb slain whose blood was painted over the doorposts on the night the spirit of God visited the captives and oppressors in Egypt. The Lamb stands for protection in the darkness of the night of human suffering.

In Revelation's beautiful heavenly vision, the Lamb slain is reborn and is at the center of the throne. The saints have come to worship. One of the elders asks: "Who are these, clothed in white robes, and where have they come from?" Who are these righteous ones, these saints at the throne of God? The reply is: "They are coming out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb."

We enter heaven thanks to the blood of the Lamb, thanks to the blood of Christ. Christ's own blood has justified us, which has opened for us the gates of heaven. And if today we remember our brothers and sisters who have gone before us in life and are in Heaven, it is because they have been washed in the blood of Christ. This is our hope. It is a hope that does not disappoint. (adapted from Pope Francis)

Here they come, streaming in, streaming one after another after another, from every nation, too many to count. They are coming, and nothing can stop them now. They are coming out of the great ordeal, the great tribulation. How encouraging this must have been for that first generation of Christians who read this. Christians in many places and in many situations did not have an easy time of their faith. They suffered for their faith in God and in Jesus. I hope we will remember at least that today. For any of us whose faith can be worn when convenient or tossed in the drawer so easily, there are countless Christians who have suffered to the point of death for their faith in Christ, their confession that he is Lord and none other; no one on the

throne but Christ alone. Christians, beginning with the Apostles, have borne tremendous cost to bear witness to God in Christ. Let us not be quick to occupy the throne of our hearts with any but Jesus. Let us not be quick to anoint to the crown of glory any other pretenders. The cross still stands at the center of the world and the slain lamb still reigns on the throne over all principalities and powers. All knees shall bow in heaven and earth and under the earth and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of the Father.

The glory of Revelation must be read through the lens of suffering. If you cannot read Revelation through suffering you'll veer off into an interpretive ditch. You'll have plenty of company there! You must read it through suffering: Jesus's suffering on behalf of humankind and that of the martyrs who took up their cross to follow him. Read Revelation through your own pain in whatever shape that takes these days. Read Revelation in empathy for the suffering of others all around you, in your community and beyond. For all the mysterious, wild images in the apocalyptic vision, it comes down to this question Revelation poses and answers: is suffering final and fatal? Is there any hope for us and for the world? You have to feel that question to read this book.

You might think for a people who believe in the cross and resurrection, the answer would be simple. Of course, there's hope. Jesus who died is resurrected to new life. That's true, but for those who suffer, the knowledge of faith is sorely tested by the reality of life. When our bodies revolt against us, when it seems like the foundation of life is crumbling, when core relationships are fractured . . . we are brought face to face with the existential crises of life and faith. This is the place from which Revelation was written and this was the life situation into which it speaks. Into which it speaks of beasts and dragons, of darkness and death.

The force of trouble is felt acutely in this part of the book, chapters 6-7. We're told there are 7 seals that are going to be opened. One at a time. We're not told exactly what a seal is supposed to represent, but each time a seal is opened, the first seal, the second seal, the third seal...each time a seal is opened, something more harrowing comes. If you can handle the first, then there's the second, and then the third, and on and on and on. Can you relate to this? Can you imagine a season of life when it seems like you're taking one blow and then another? That's at least what the seals represent. When will it stop? Will this ever end? Where is God in all of this when it seems like God is silent and distant, if God even exists.

Is suffering final and fatal? Is there any hope for us and for the world? The first century Christians experienced some of this. They aren't the last ones. You may not have experienced persecution for your faith, not like this, not like they did, but there are seasons in a lot of people's lives where it seems like the hits just keep on coming. What's to stop it? Who can stop the storm? Who has the power to still the wind?

By the time the 6th seal is opened, everyone wants to just hide from the world, from one another and from God. "May the mountains fall on us and hide us. Even God must be an enemy, for in all of this, who can stand?

Who can stand this? I can't stand one more thing. I can't stand one more word. I can't stand one more day.

Do you know that feeling? Do you know, really know that measure of despair? Some do. It is an act of empathetic love to pause regularly in your prayer and bring to your heart those in your life for whom this may be their unspoken prayer: Lord, I cannot stand this one more day. I cannot take one more thing.

By the time we come to this point in Revelation, hope is all but gone, strength to stand is all but gone. We wait for the final blow, the 7th seal to be opened. Just when we are waiting for its arrival, then, ah, something different comes—Something unexpected. There's a turn; there's a change. There's something new-- just at the moment we were weakest.

When I am weak, God is strong.
It may be Friday, but Sunday's on its way.

What is this? It is Hope. At the darkest moment, there's something new. Angels, standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the winds. There's reprieve, protection. God has intervened. Just when we thought we couldn't take one more thing, there's relief. There's hope. God comes near.

The kindness of the hope is so intimate, so surprisingly intimate. As the people of God come streaming in glory, robes washed white in the blood of the Lamb, a song of unending praise rises on their lips. They are ok. They will be ok. We will be ok. All shall be well. We are sheltered with God's presence; we shall hunger and thirst no more nor suffer the blazing hot sun. The Lamb becomes the shepherd who guides us to the springs of living water, to their very source of living water in the heart of grace. "And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

In these days and in this life the tears still come, but they will not come forever and ever. At the throne of the Lamb, God will wipe them away, every one of them. Until that day, hold on to hope. Hold on to light. Hold on to one another. Hold on to faith. Keep walking in the good and hard days, keep singing *Holy, holy, holy*, until that beautiful day to come, when we sing together at the throne of the Lamb who was slain and who is risen.