

“REMEMBERING...”

Psalm 34:1-10; Revelation 7:9-17

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Introduction to the scripture: Revelation is among the most neglected books of the Bible. Pastors seldom preach on it and laypeople seldom read it on their own. What most people know about it comes from a certain kind of preacher or writer whose intent is to scare you into becoming a certain kind of believer. The best advice I can give you comes from the great and powerful Wizard of Oz: When Dorothy and her friends return with the broomstick of the wicked witch, he says “Pay no attention to that man over there!”

Revelation is not a current events manual forecasting the end of the world. It is highly imaginative and symbolic, making it susceptible to this kind of misreading. And its visionary character puts many of us off from exploring it on our own.

So I want make a few remarks to set the context of today’s reading. John has been sent this vision which details a kind of story about the struggle between the forces of evil and God. Chapter 7 interrupts the part of the story where seven scrolls are being opened. Each scroll reveals something about the workings of evil in the world. This chapter represents an interlude in the action just before the opening of the seventh scroll which will reveal the worst that evil can do. As such it serves as a reminder of what will be most important to the faithful as the days become even more challenging.

The first part of the chapter talks about the marking of the 144,000 for protection. The number 144 breaks down into 12 times 12, a reference to the twelve tribes of Israel. The implication is that the full contingent of Israel will fall under the shelter of God’s protection. The scene then observes a countless number of people from every nation who are also to be numbered among the faithful. These are the gentiles who have answered the call of Jesus. Barbara Brown Taylor suggests that we take note of the way in which all of the senses are appealed to in the passage. There are things to see, to hear, to feel, to smell, and to touch. See if you can pick them out.

Read Revelation 7:9-17

As I said, this scene breaks up the action. It’s dropped into the middle of a crisis, just before things become as bad as they can get. It’s a reminder to John and his audience of the sorts of things that will be important to remember as the terror deepens. There are three things I want to highlight from this text that suggest what we should remember.

The first comes when we learn who this multitude is. “They are those who have been through the great ordeal.” As the crisis approaches, remember those who have been through it before. These are the saints: some who were still alive and some who have

died. These are the ones who remained faithful when they were called on to reject their faith. These are the ones who continued to believe that they belonged to God, even when circumstances might have suggested otherwise. Remember them.

The crisis in John's day was political in nature. All people in the empire were called on to assert their loyalty to Caesar, to acknowledge him as their Lord. Christians had come to acknowledge Jesus as Lord and that through him they belonged only to God and not to Rome. Some who refused to take the oath were put to death, others imprisoned, enslaved, or denied basic rights.

This may be difficult for us to identify with since we have been free to practice our faith from birth. But there are other ways in which faith may be challenged.

This is God's world, but any number of things may lead us to question that truth: illness, accident or injury to ourselves or to someone we love; loss of job or financial hardship; conflict in the workplace or on the playground. Ongoing racism, sexism, or environmental destruction may lead us to wonder whether God had abandoned us.

John's Revelation offers a remedy here. Remember the saints. We know people whose bodies have lost the struggle against cancer, but whose faithfulness through the struggle has been an example to us all. We can recall St. Francis whose love for all the creatures of the earth inspires us to affirm God's care for a world that extends beyond the human. We remember Martin Luther King, Jr., whose fight against racism opened up new possibilities for many people of every ethnicity. We remember people nearer to us today whose example of faith inspires a stronger dependence on the love of God.

Remember the saints: the living and the dead, those who have challenged the forces of evil and those who have quietly led a faithful life devoted to justice; those whose work creates a better world and those whose nurture of children plants good seed for the future. Remember the saints.

And remember this about the saints: they always have a song on their lips. When you belong to God, there's always something to sing about. The saint is oriented toward gratitude and thankfulness feels doubled when it's sung. This doesn't require a great voice. Some are too embarrassed to sing out loud, but some part of the saint sings even if it's only the heart. The saint sings about "blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might." The saint sings of the great mercies of God.

The saints – our saints – sing to us. And their song lends us courage for the journey, offers insight into our troubles, gives us strength when we feel weak, and offers hope when the way is not clear. Remember the saints, for they sing to us.

Finally the saints hope. They believe in a future made by God, a future when hunger and thirst are no more. They know that God will lead them to the "springs of the water of life," a place where as the psalmist says they can "taste and see that the Lord is good."

This why cancer doesn't break them, and why the politics of the day doesn't shake them. They know that whatever evil or injustice persists, it cannot endure. Tomorrow belongs to God.

In this time before the "great ordeal," remember the saints. Remember their song and take up their hope. Perhaps we, too, live in the time between the six scrolls and the seventh. Perhaps darker days lie ahead. Perhaps the challenges to faith will grow, not lessen. In that day, remember the saints, remember the song, and remember the hope. Amen.

Resources:

Barbara Brown Taylor, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 4*.