

Worship Theme: ALL SAINTS SUNDAY

Live Stream at 10:30 AM on Facebook: First Christian Church Decatur

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“There’s Life After Loss Thanks to Life After Life”

Sermon for First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Decatur, Georgia
All Saints Sunday, November 15, 2020
James L. Brewer-Calvert, Senior Pastor

Scriptures: 1 John 3: 1-3 Revelation 7: 9-17

1 John 3: 1-3

See what love the Creator has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God’s children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.

Revelation 7: 9-17

⁹ After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. ¹⁰ They cried out in a loud voice, saying, “Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!”

¹¹ And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, ¹² singing, “Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.”

¹³ Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, “Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?”

¹⁴ I said to him, “Sir, you are the one that knows.”

Then he said to me, “These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. ¹⁵ For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them. ¹⁶ They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; ¹⁷ for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

Benjamin Chapman had an inkling he was supposed to be long gone and buried by now,
the way everyone tiptoed around the house,
peering in at him on his bed,
the long faces,
boxes of tissues all around.

However he could not sleep any longer.

The aroma was tantalizing.

He identified the smell: hot chocolate chip cookies.

Martha's specialty.

Benjamin got up and put on his bathrobe.

He walked down the hall.

He entered the kitchen.

There they were, on the counter: a full platter of chocolate chip cookies.

He reached out for the closest one...

suddenly Martha slapped his hand!

"You may not!" she said. "Those are for the funeral."

The inscription inside the front cover of my funeral manual,
presented to me 32 years ago at my ordination to the Christian Ministry
by my father in law Reverend Don Brewer, reads:
"For and in being a comforter."

For and In Being a Comforter

This morning we explore the Holy Source of comfort.

Let us turn to the Holy Scriptures.

"I lift my eyes to the hills. From whence does our help come?" (Psalm 121: 1)

In times of suffering and loss, who will offer succor?
Who will wipe away our tears, and ease our burdens?
From whence does our help, our comfort come?

Such a question was raised in the Book of Revelation,
where we first encounter John of Patmos.

John was a servant of Jesus Christ,
and he aligned himself with the suffering Christians
who were being persecuted by the Emperor Domitian.
John lived in exile on the island of Patmos,

off the west coast of Asia Minor.
His fellow Christians were being persecuted by Domitian
because they refused to worship him,
to call him Lord or Savior or even God.
For their civil disobedience and spiritual practices
they were arrested, lost their possessions,
suffered economic boycotts, and in many cases, were put to death.
To people in struggling churches and struggling with life,
John of Patmos offered a strange, wonderful, and visionary book
we have before us called "The Revelation to John".
He stressed the Lordship of Jesus Christ,
the powerful grace of God,
and the ultimate victory of good over evil,
love over hate, grace over sin.

Listen again to these words from Revelation:

*After this I looked, and there was a great multitude
that no one could count, from every nation,
from all tribes and peoples and languages,
standing before the throne and before the Lamb,
robed in white, with palm branches in their hands.
¹⁰ They cried out in a loud voice, saying,
"Salvation belongs to our God
who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!"*

John of Patmos was sharing that he was given a vision of an inclusive multitude.

Can you envision with John an inclusive multitude?
What would it take?

Reflect the diversity the Spirit has made in the image of God.

Worship and come together as if all are one before the Lamb of God,
because we are One before the Lamb of God.

This is an image of hope, a vision of fulfillment,
and a celebration of the diversity of God's creation.

How many is a multitude?

A multitude is huge number, one so big that it is impossible to count,
an infinite quantity,
like a wide sea of shining faces and souls saved by the grace of God.

The Revelation is a living testament of the magnitude of God's grace,
of love unbounded and unfettered by any limitations of exclusiveness.

John of Patmos wrote down the vision, the revelation
in the same vein as classic apocalyptic literature,
in the same genre as Daniel and Ezekiel,
prophets who had apocalyptic vision of God.

Daniel dreamed dreams and was freed from lions,
while Ezekiel saw visions of hope in a valley of dry bones.

Revelation is clearly an effort to comfort, strengthen and encourage
a people who are hurting and broken,
folks just like us who are coping with great loss and grief.

For and In Being a Comforter

Unfortunately, some spiritual leaders have used Revelation as a scare tactic.

Their emphasis is on the apocalypse.

"Apocalypse (Greek: "lifting of the veil") is a term
applied to the disclosure to certain privileged persons
of something hidden from the majority of humankind.

Today the term is often used to refer to the end of the world,
which may be a shortening of the phrase *apokalupsis eschaton*
which literally means "revelation at the end of the æon, or age".
(definition from Wikipedia)

When we view the apocalypse, the lifting of the veil, the revelation of God
from a position of fear,
fear of being alone, fear of being left behind,
fear of exclusion from the kingdom,
then our own fears and misperceptions
keep the God of grace and glory at a distance.

When we choose instead
to view the apocalypse from a place of faith, as a source of comfort,
we leave fear behind.

We can take on a faith that we will be included,
we can build a faith that we will be brought along
with the saints who have gone on before us.

When we leave fear behind
and let our faith leap and lead us into grace upon grace,
we are freed to tap into the supreme source of comfort and hope.

We are blessed by God to live in a resurrection-drenched world.
I've heard people say otherwise.

I'm sure you have too, that this season we live in is cursed,
not a season of resurrection and hope
but an apocalypse, an end of times.

So many are in despair.

A Rabbi once said, *"The only unforgivable sin is despair, because despair denies God."*

Despair denies.

Hope affirms.

You know, in the Bible an apocalypse is a gift,
for it ushers in a new, great awakening of hope.

My friends, choose now to see an apocalypse as an unveiling,
a season when illusions are exposed,
an era when we come face-to-face with truth.

Let us lift our veils
as we walk together into a new normal,
greatly awakened,
heeding the call to love,
building a civil society,
creating the Beloved Community.

Lift the veil.

Let the revelation of hope and truth
sink in of a grace-drenched Beloved Community,
for comfort comes to you from God,
a loving and merciful and forgiving Creator who loves you
and a multitude just like you,
all made in God's image from the beginning.

These are words of hope and comfort.

Not one word, not one element of fear here in Revelation.

If the revelation is indeed a revealing of the grace of God,
why should we be afraid?

Even the discussion of tribulation and trials and tragedy
is offered to the people in the past tense.

We have already moved through the pain,
we are past the suffering and are able to cope with loss.

There is life after loss because there is life after life.

"Who are these, robed in white,

*and where have they come from?" asked John of Patmos.
"These are they who have come out of the great ordeal;
they have washed their robes
and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.
¹⁵ For this reason they are before the throne of God,
and worship him day and night within his temple,
and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them.
¹⁶ They will hunger no more, and thirst no more;
the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat;
¹⁷ for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd,
and he will guide them to springs of the water of life,
and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes." (Rev. 7: 14-17)*

A friend said he learned this line as a youth
and it has stuck with him ever since:
*"One day God will wipe away all tears from our eyes;
until that day God will cry with us."*

For and In Being a Comforter

When the comedian George Burns reached 100 years old
he was asked what he would like on his epitaph.
"I would like to be standing there reading it," said Burns.

Remember and celebrate the New Creation we are in Christ,
for God enables us to live with loss.
There is life after loss because there is life after life.
We have lost friends, lost jobs, lost opportunities,
lost mobility, lost talents, lost love.
God and the faith community help us to move and grow forward,
offering to one another that which God intends for us to find...
an amazing grace which God imparts upon our humble hearts.

We live with loss and cope with hope.
We celebrate in our congregation that there is a mighty strength
for people to draw upon,
a blessed support network
in which you and I find nurture in times of grief and loss.
We do not live alone.
God is nigh; we have Christ and one another.

For and In Being a Comforter

What is it we do when we see someone in need of comfort?

We bake chocolate chip cookies.

We empathize.

We reach out.

We wipe away tears; we shed a few of our own.

We testify that death is a new beginning in Christ,
a transition of grace into grace.

We have this hope.

In communion with Christ and one another,
we find ourselves able to move forward in life, and in life after life.

After Peter Marshall died,

Catherine, his wife, was offered condolences for her loss.

She said, *"My husband Peter is not lost. I know exactly where he is."*

We, too, know exactly where he is:

he lives, he lives again with Christ and all the saints,
with all our saints.

All power to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!