“For ALL the Saints”

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Revelation 7:9-17

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Like so many of us sheltering at home every night, I’ve been catching up on movies and television shows. My husband and I just finished the first season of “Lovecraft Country,” which is a show about a young black man on a road trip across 1950s Jim Crow era America in search of his missing father. The story tellers utilized a unique a blend of horror and science fiction to tell the story of being black in America during segregation using magic, monsters, and time travel. In my opinion, the show is a work of art in the way that it blends music, actual recorded speeches and poems, and graphic, bold, and fantastical images to reveal what this era was like through the eyes of black people. Additionally and in contrast, it casts a hopeful vision of what love, survival, and perseverance has to offer for future generations. I do highly recommend watching it, but if you have children in your home, you’ll want to wait until the kids are in bed for this one.

This use of unimaginable, apocalyptic imagery in “Lovecraft Country” reminded me a bit of the book of Revelation, the source of our scripture for today. This was the type of rhetorical device that John of Patmos used to describe a vision of the destruction of the Roman Empire and the birth of a New Jerusalem. Many of us dodge this book of the bible for a number of reasons. It’s so graphic and provocative, it is easily misunderstood, and it has been used to invoke fear of the so-called Rapture, most famously depicted in the “Left Behind” series of books. In truth, John’s likely intention was to use apocalyptic imagery to cast a vision of deliverance and hope, perhaps to an audience of persecuted Christians. In other words, it was written to comfort people, not scare them. The word “Apocalypse” comes from the Greek “apokalypsis” which means an unveiling, a revealing of what was previous concealed, hence the title “Revelation.” In this case, as wild as the book of Revelation may seem, the overriding narrative is about God’s rule and the Kingdom of Heaven having the ultimate and final word in a chaotic and oppressive world.

By contrast, this morning’s text actually seems fairly mild, but let me set the scene first. There has just been an earthquake of epic proportions, where the sun turns black, the moon turns blood red, the stars fall from the sky, the sky rolled away like a scroll and the island of Patmos and mountains were relocated. Both the rich and powerful are huddled with slaves hidden in caves. It is a terrifying image, but just as more destruction is anticipated, there is a pause to seal the members of the 12 tribes of Israel as servants of God, specifically 12,000 people from each tribe, for a total of 144,000 people. This is where we will pick up John’s wild vision in Revelation 7:9-17. I invite you to hear God’s word for you today:

*9After 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. 10They cried out in a loud voice, saying, “Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!” 11And 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, 12singing, “Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.”*

*13Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, “Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?” 14I 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. 15For 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. 16They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat;17for 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.”*

This is the word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

What a beautiful, unifying image in the midst of such chaos! On the heels of the sealing of 144,000 chosen people comes a larger, more vast, more inclusive vision of the Kingdom of God. The text tells us that while we might be able to count to 144,000, we cannot count this number. They come from every tribe, every nation, and speak every language. This group is not just our favorite people or the people we deem worthy by their deeds or even those who have the same values as we do. No, the picture cast is far more colorful, infinite, and lively than that. So what does this apocalyptic image from John of Patmos reveal to us that was previously concealed?

Well, let’s start with who we would expect to see in the Kingdom of God: all the religious types, right? The do-gooders, the pretty people, the successful people, charismatic leaders, and the pious crowd. Yet after the earthquake and the world being turned upside down, there is a heavenly gathering of people which includes: the Jews and the Gentiles, the poor and the powerful, the black and white, male and female, adult and child, Republicans and Democrats, people from every single continent, indigenous people and immigrants. We cannot count how many, yet there is plenty of room for all.

Today is All Saint’s day, and I love the Lectionary’s offering of this text for today. Traditionally, All Saint’s day began as a day set aside to recognize the Virgin Mary and martyrs of the faith. Fourteen hundred years later, this observance has expanded to include all saints, even those who have not been officially recognized or canonized by the Catholic Church. It was my hope to share this word with you today from Memorial Garden where would be surrounded by the saints of First Presbyterian Church. Instead, I preach today from FPC’s History room where I am surrounded by pictures, news clippings, and remembrances of the Saints who went before us. Today, we remember all those who have lived and died in the faith, those whose stories we have heard and those whose stories we have actually witnessed. The timing every year on November 1st is appropriate as we see signs of transition all around us. The leaves are changing and falling from the trees, summer’s blooms have faded away and become dormant, and we prepare for the dark winter ahead. To have this celebration of our Saints is to be reminded of Easter’s promises that death is not the final word. This is a cherished, hopeful word with which we cling in the midst of such dark times in our world.

Yet, there is also a sense of paradox in this observance. What exactly qualifies one as a Saint anyway? We tend to think of the Angels in our midst, the Mother Teresa types, the people of faith who seem to most exemplify God’s grace to us. They are our faith heroes. Yet, if we are being honest, who can really measure up to this standard on a day to day basis?

One of my favorite pastors, Nadia Bolz Weber, tells this story in her book “Accidental Saints” of when she was starting a new church in Denver, CO. She was walking downtown when she noticed a sizeable memorial of sorts in the courtyard of a large and odd-looking church. The roof of the Pillar of Fire Church is crowned with the enormous pink call letters KPOF that light up at night, making it look like what it actually is: a Pentecostal church that doubles as a radio station. She squinted to read the inscription on the memorial: “Alma White, founder of the Pillar of Fire Church, 1901.” Turning to her friend, she said, “Alma? That’s a woman’s name, isn’t it? Did a *woman* plant a church in Denver in 1901?” Nadia later reflected, “I didn’t know of many women who had set out to start churches all by themselves, much less at the turn of the twentieth century, so, desperate as I was for someone I could place in the category “hero” and “role model” since I was starting my own church in Denver, I pulled out my phone and Googled Alma White. My excitement about discovering a hero **only built** as I read her Wikipedia entry: ‘Alma Bridwell White (June 16, 1862-June 26, 1946) was the founder and a bishop of the Pillar of Fire Church.” She went on to read that in 1918, Alma became the first female bishop in the United States. She was noted for her feminism and her association with none other than The Ku Klux Klan, anti-Catholicism, anti-Semitism, anti-Pentecostalism, racism, and hostility to immigrants... [[1]](#footnote-1)

Yikes. And the truth is, if we dig deep enough, we can find frailties and flaws in one form or another in every human being. Often, when I’m meeting with a family planning the funeral of their loved one, I’m honored that they will share the entire story of their beloved to help me cull down what might be shared in the homily. And I’m always a little tickled to learn what can be shared and what is strictly “off the record.” And frankly, the “off the record” stuff is usually the most interesting. Every now and then, I’ll be given permission to tell the whole story about this Saint, which reveals the undeniable truth that Saints are simply flawed people who often do wonderfully divine things by the grace of God and the grace of God alone.

Recently, in response to the heated dialogue about race in our country, we have been hosting book discussions in our Racial Equity Reads group. A few weeks ago, we finished our latest book entitled “White Too Long: The Legacy of White Supremacy in American Christianity” by Robert Jones. I highly, highly recommend that every Christian read this book, but with the disclaimer that it is not for the faint of heart. It was a tough read about some disheartening truths, truths that we often omit or gloss over. Many of us in the group did further research about Christianity’s complicity and participation in issues like slavery, segregation, and even lynchings, thinking surely this didn’t apply to our denomination or our church. So we specifically dug in to Presbyterian history, and while many were abolitionists and participated in Civil Rights marches, we were horrified to learn the painful truth of devout Presbyterian church pastors and members who were slave owners and confederate soldiers, some who are buried in Memorial Garden.

So what do you say about one of our Presbyterian Saints, Rev. James Henry Thornwell, who taught at my seminary and was the namesake of our beloved Thornwell Home for Children yet also preached sermons defending slavery? In some of our more local research, we also learned that a minister of First Presbyterian Church, Rev. W.C. Alexander, led public prayer at the only lynching of two black men, Joe Kiser and Tom Johnson, to take place in Cabarrus county.[[2]](#footnote-2) How do we hold and reconcile the tension of the knowledge that the saints who were the back bones of our lives of faith, who helped build our churches, who served and taught Sunday School also participated in so much hate and violence?

By the grace of God, that’s how. God’s grace continually reveals to us that human beings are never the sum of the worst parts of them. Being created in the image of God means that we all hold within us Kingdom of God potential. When we tell the wonderful, awful, amazing and painful stories about our Saints, God’s grace reveals to us that God’s divine intentions can be worked out in any of us…and I mean, any of us. What is so beautiful in this morning’s text is the broadly inclusive image of the great cloud of witnesses that John Patmos presents. They still speak to us in their stories, in both their moments of grace and in their moments of downfall. We remember and lift up their stories, their victories, their struggles, and their mistakes and place these stories in our lives as what it means to be faithful and flawed followers of Jesus Christ. We can learn from their mistakes, and we can allow those lessons to guide us to reparations and more faithful decisions. It’s a reminder that even as we get things terribly, terribly wrong sometimes, there is always just enough grace to make it right.

In a few moments, we will remember our church members who have joined the Church Triumphant in the past year. And while we remember and celebrate them during this time, I encourage you to name even more Saints as it is **All** Saints day. So let us lift up Mary Magdalene, and Alma White; Jesus’ disciples, and yes, this is awkward but perhaps even Judas? Rev. James Thornwell and Frederick Douglass; Rev. WC Alexander, Joe Kiser, and Tom Johnson; Rev. Martin Luther King Jr, John Lewis, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, and the 1.2 million people who have died of Covid worldwide. As our text tells us, there are too many to count.

Friends, we live in such divided times, grief-filled times, apocalyptic times. John of Patmos offers an inclusive and united vision of our common humanity as it is grounded in God’s grace. As we prepare to share the Lord’s Supper, I want to share one more powerful image of the communion of saints as presented in a movie called “Places in the Heart.” If you haven’t seen the movie, it stars Sallie Field as a single mother who lost her husband in a tragic accident during the Great Depression in Texas. The tragedy sparked a lynching and the story unfolds a cast of characters who struggle to survive and heal. Without giving too much away, the movie comes to an end in a church with communion plates being passed person to person, hand to hand, between both the living and the deceased characters of the story. The Church Triumphant, indeed.

There are too many Saints to name, and there is not a church large enough to contain all of them. But we will be united with them, this inclusive and diverse cloud of witnesses during the Lord’s Supper today. As we prepare our feast wherever we are, let us celebrate the sheer magnitude of gifts we have received from their collective offering, and allow those gifts to unite us and to heal us. Let us join our voices with theirs as we give thanks and praise to our Holy God. Amen.

1. Nadia Bolz Weber, *Accidental Saints,* 5 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. http://newspapers.digitalnc.org/lccn/sn91068267/1898-05-30/ed-1/seq-1/ [↑](#footnote-ref-2)