

Revealing Revelation: Easter Worship Series

“Bigger than Us”

Sermon Text: Revelation 7:9-17

FUMC, Arlington, TX 76011

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In Revelation John tends to use the number “7” to express his ideas. For example, while there may be as many as twenty or more references to seven please accept these cases as proof: seven churches (1:4, 11, 20) seven Spirits (1:4, 3:1, 4:5, 5:6), seven golden lampstands (1:12-13, 20, 2:1), seven stars (1:16, 20, 2:1, 3:1), seven seals (5:1, 5:5), and/or seven horns (5:6).

In Revelation the first set of seven, after the seven letters of chapters 2-3, is the breaking of the seven seals in four chapters (4:1–8:1). A lengthy interval occurs between the sixth and seventh seal, then we return to a heavenly vision. John here registers a profound change that we see in heaven. We now perceive the presence of human beings. Previously John counts these as numbering 144,000 from Israel. Now John tells us they are so numerous that we cannot count them. Who are these? They are martyrs and come from every tribe and nation. They no longer suffer—“neither hunger nor thirst” (Isaiah 49:10). Again we see Christ and not simply as the Lamb, but as the martyr’s shepherd. Perhaps we remember John’s Gospel where John describes Christ as the Good Shepherd (John 10:11-18).

We read this text on All Saints’ Day. The vast numbers in the text remind us of believers who followed Christ, and yet are not officially canonized saints. Christ calls each Christian to become a saint. Paul uses the word “saint” when he addresses the Christians of Rome (Romans 1:7). In a way then, this text is about worship and saints or believers—the NT uses the words more or less interchangeably. Hear our lesson:

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” (Revelation 7:9-17).

People sometimes express shock the first time they visit Sistine Chapel. It is as if their eyes play tricks. What these fortunate observers see is what the great master painted—Michelangelo’s frescoes. Fresco is a technique of mural painting achieved upon freshly-laid, or wet lime plaster. Michelangelo’s colors are so vivid, so remarkable—stunning—even. The blues and reds and pinks, the brilliant flesh colors, fill people with awe over the artist’s genius. On the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel is Michelangelo’s greatest fresco. He titled the work “From Creation to Last Judgment.” All Saints Day reveals its importance in this odd and interesting fact: It was unveiled on All Saints Day of 1541. Thus, Michelangelo held All Saints Day in great reverence. His greatest work among many great works he dedicated to God on All Saints Day.

People tend to divide God’s world into halves—the good and the bad. We have for example, the Hatfields and the McCoys or the Capulets and the Montegues. We have city folks and country folk; we have Rebels and Yankees. In Texas we have the natives and the interlopers. At times it seems easy to divide the world into two parts. The Bible divides the world into Jews or Gentiles—no dual citizenship. A person is either a Jew or a Gentile. Yet, Paul provides a telling phrase that summarizes Christ’s work: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28). Christ has knocked down the dividing walls of hostility.

In the life of the cohesive church that Christ united by his death there are also two divisions. The first group Revelation describes as “the church militant.” These are believers who struggle

this side of death. We try to make sense of this world and hope for the world to come. We are people who give to God, pray for others, and offer our meager acts of mercy on behalf of those for whom Christ has died. But according to Revelation 7, there is also another part of the church. This other part is “the church triumphant.” Our lesson today describes this church element. These are the faithful who have come through the great ordeal. The great ordeal describes the things that take place at the end of human history. Many Bible pundits take this view. Yet, we could recognize the great ordeal as an individual’s death. After all—death is an ordeal.

I want us to notice two more things about this passage. First, those redeemed by the blood of the lamb worship before God. The essence of heaven is holy worship before God. The redeemed sing, pray, and pay homage to God and the lamb uninterrupted. Heaven looks like a vast worship service—every creature participates.

A second thing to notice is that those who worship God in heaven God protects. God protects worshippers from every evil and infirmity that previously plagued them on earth. Do you remember the promise fulfilled?

They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them,
nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd.

The lamb slain for the people of God now becomes the shepherd. John’s description of the church triumphant must have been a comfort to persons suffering persecution for their faith. As we read this passage it should comfort us too.

We want a better world. Some person give their time, money, and energy to make it a reality. Yet, in all of our lives there looms a despair that is about as comforting as a cold blanket on a damp, dreary day. Despite our all too human fondness to look at the world without “rose-colored-glasses,” the truth is that we want to believe that God has better things in store. For this reason, we remember the saints. Those persons who have gone before us stand as witnesses. They give testimony by their lives that God rules and overrules this world. They tell us by their lives that no

matter how things may look to us, God is both creator and redeemer of all things.

[Jimmy Roberts covers a variety of events for ESPN, including golf. He was assigned to cover Payne Stewart's funeral. These were some of his thoughts the night before Stewart's services]:

Payne was not my friend, but it's hard to think of him as just one of the subjects I cover. For seven years now, I have left my family for weeks at a time and spent my days—and sometimes evenings—with people like Payne Stewart.

I actually didn't like him at first. He wasn't very nice . . . especially to a new guy on the beat. But he changed—I'm sure I did too—and we started to fashion some type of uncertain relationship based on the fact that we seemed to run into each other a lot.

There were landmarks along the way. At the 1996 PGA Championship, the tour wives hosted a benefit to premiere the film "Tin Cup." I sat with Payne and Tracey Stewart—only admitted to the gala because I had a small part in the film—and took an unrelenting ribbing when my scene came on. At the time Payne was going through an emotional epiphany of sorts. He had endured a long winless streak that reintroduced him to the concept of humility. He worked hard to do right by people he might have wronged before.

When my boys were young we used to go to the Colonial Golf Tournament. Years ago my son Ry happened to see Payne Stewart and asked him to autograph some items. Payne was cordial and friendly to an eleven-year-old boy. People say that Payne wasn't always that way, but he was for Ry. Later in Revelation we find these words:

"And I heard a voice from heaven saying, 'Write this: Blessed are the dead who from now on die in the Lord.' 'Yes,' says the Spirit, 'they will rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them'" (Revelation 14:13).

Today as we wonder about this text, we remember that God calls us all to become saints with God's help. We remember that we honor those whose deeds have indeed followed them and God when we worship. For this we give God thanks. Amen.