

**A Sermon by the Rev. Bollin M. Millner, Jr.**  
**All Saints' Sunday 2011**  
**Grace and Holy Trinity Episcopal Church**  
**Richmond, Va**

**Revelation 7:9-17**

*After this I, John, 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. They cried out in a loud voice, saying,*

*"Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!" 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, singing,*

*"Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.*

*"Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?" 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.*

*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. 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, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."*

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With fear and trepidation I am taking for my sermon text today, as we celebrate All Saints' Sunday, the reading from the Book of Revelation. Luke Timothy Johnson, a New Testament scholar out of Candler School of Theology in Atlanta has written: "Few writings in all of literature have been so obsessively read with such generally disastrous results as the Book of Revelation..."<sup>1</sup>

Fools rush in where angels fear to tread...so here goes. And let me begin this treacherous journey with broad brush strokes to give you a sense of the book in its entirety. This is going to get a little academic, perhaps, but stay with me. I've been living inside the Book of Revelation for a while now and I want to invite you into my madness. I need some company.

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<sup>1</sup> See his "The Writings of the New Testament: An Introduction" page Page 512.

Revelation was written by a man named John, who was exiled on the island of Patmos, in the eastern Mediterranean. John writes a prophetic word to seven churches that are in the province of Asia...modern day Turkey. The seven churches are .... Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea” John is writing to encourage some of them, call some of them to repentance, and to let all of them know that regardless of appearances, God is in control.

<Three sorts of problems confront the seven churches of Revelation:

**false teaching** is the problem at

(Ephesus, Pergamum, Thyatira);

**persecution** is the issue at (Smyrna, Philadelphia);

**and complacency** is the problem at

(Sardis, Laodicea)

When Revelation is talking about Smyrna and Philadelphia, those churches facing persecution “...nothing bad is said...”; They are commended and encouraged...The word for them is, “Do not be afraid...” 2:10

The churches of Ephesus, Pergamum and Thyatira – those dealing with false teaching... get mixed reviews.

Good things are mentioned, (“you continue to cling to (Jesus) name” 2:13b) but then the text goes on to say, “But I have this against you...” And accusations are made such as “you have departed from your first love...do the deeds you did at the first.”

Then there are the final two churches...Sardis and Laodicea... and nothing good is said of them. These are the churches marked by complacency. John, speaking a word from the Lord says, “ I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either cold or hot! So because you are lukewarm...I am going to spit you out of my mouth..... 3:14 ff > <sup>2</sup> As we read this we can’t help but wonder “Where do we fit in?” And that is a sermon...but not for today.

After these introductory words to the seven churches, the Book launches into extraordinary visions and cryptic scenes for which Revelation is famous...there are four living creatures, twenty four elders, scrolls sealed with seven seals , four horsemen, horrendous plagues, bowls of wrath, and more.

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<sup>2</sup> For the section <...> See Raymond Brown’s “An Introduction to the New Testament” page 782

Many have tried to figure out all these details and apply them in fantastical ways, often with disastrous results as noted by Luke Timothy Johnson.

But, to interpret this Book well, we must not get hung up in the details. It is not the individual brush strokes that matter but the picture as a whole that is the point.

And "...despite its elaborate symbolism, ( what Revelation is about is) ...a rather straightforward interpretation of history. (The message is this:) Appearances to the contrary, God is in charge of the world."<sup>3</sup> All things will be put right.

But it is not just about the future. Revelation also affirms "that the triumph of God over evil and death ...has already been realized *in heaven (in God's realm)* ... (And so now) The hope of the saints ...is based on the present power of God manifest in the resurrection of Jesus, *and* of the saints who have joined him in heaven."<sup>4</sup>

The Book ends with "...the final reconciliation of earth and heaven...by which Revelation draws full circle back to Genesis 1 and 2...(as God declares) 'Behold I make all things new.' (21:5)"<sup>5</sup>

This is the message. God is in control of the world and promises that all things will be put right. Jesus' resurrection and the saints who have joined him in heaven are present realities and at the same time, signs of this future redemption. In the end, heaven itself will be united to earth and all things will be made new.

And periodically in the Book of Revelation the curtain is pulled back and we are given glimpses of heaven. We see the future made present in visions of heavenly worship.

That is what our reading for today is about: "I looked and lo, a huge gathering which nobody could count...these are the saints, who have washed their clothes and made them white in the blood of the lamb. They are in front of God's throne serving him day and night."

It is these saints, along with the angels and archangels, that make up the whole company of heaven and with whom we join together week by week as we worship.

The Book of Revelation as a whole and that passage in particular present a good, powerful and positive message and one that resonates on All Saints Sunday. Now I know that this message has been obscured.

It is obscured on the one hand by an angry fundamentalism which longs for the violent destruction of God's beloved creation. A generation ago, books like Hal Lindsay's "Late Great

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<sup>3</sup> Page 516 of Luke Timothy Johnson's "The Writings of the New Testament"

<sup>4</sup> Johnson page 517.

<sup>5</sup> See Johnson page 527.

Planet Earth” and more recently the wildly popular “Left Behind” series present a profoundly erroneous interpretation of Revelation in my opinion. And they give rise to defeatism and immoral behavior. The world will be destroyed, so they believe, so why care for it. All the while, the true message of Revelation is that God is making all things new.

But let’s be honest. The message of Revelation is also obscured by an indecisive, “spiritual but not religious”, rudderless “anything goes as long as it is sincere” approach.

This approach would make no demands, offer no call commitment, thereby betraying the faith and hope of the Saints of Revelation who literally gave their lives for Christ Jesus. They did not die for an “option”, equal to all others. They died for what they believed to be the way, the truth and the life.

Lillian Daniel, has some things to say about all this. She is the senior minister of the First Congregational Church in Glen Ellyn, Illinois. I’ve heard her speak, and she is very engaging...she may have some anger issues to deal with, I am not sure...but she is direct and thought provoking. Let me read a bit of one of her meditations.

“On airplanes, I dread the conversation with the person who finds out I am a minister and wants to use the flight time to explain to me that he is ‘spiritual but not religious.’ Such a person will always share this as if it is some kind of daring insight, unique to him, bold in its rebellion against the religious status quo. Next thing you know, he’s telling me that he finds God in the sunsets. These people always find God in the sunsets. And in walks on the beach... (As though Christians don’t read Genesis and experience the God of creation. But you know)...Being privately spiritual but not religious just doesn’t interest me. There is nothing challenging about having deep thoughts all by oneself. What is interesting is doing this work in community... (where people can call you on stuff and actually disagree with you.) Where life with God gets rich and provocative is when you dig deeply into a tradition that you did not invent all for yourself.”

She concludes by saying “Thank you for sharing, spiritual but not religious sunset person. You are now comfortably in the norm for self-centered American culture, right smack in the bland majority of people who find ancient religions dull but find themselves uniquely fascinating. Can I switch seats now and sit next to someone who has been shaped by a mighty cloud of witnesses

instead? Can I spend my time talking to someone brave enough to encounter God in a real human community? Because when this flight gets choppy, that's who I want by my side..."<sup>6</sup>

Well, I told you she might have anger issues, but don't you just love her?

And aren't we fortunate this morning, this All Saints Sunday to stand in this great tradition stretching back through time to Christ Jesus himself and beyond him to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Aren't we fortunate to revel in the creations stories of the first chapter of Genesis and live in the hope of recreation promised in the last chapter of Revelation.

We don't have to invent this for ourselves. In God's grace, on this day, we know ourselves to be surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses, on earth and yes...in heaven, where the future is present and death is no more and God wipes away every tear.

God is in control.

All things shall be made new.

This is the good news.

Embrace it with everything you've got.

Share it with everyone you meet.

Live for it.

Die for it. Amen.

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<sup>6</sup> You can read her remarks at this link: <http://www.ucc.org/feed-your-spirit/daily-devotional/spiritual-but-not-religious.html>