

November 2, 2014
All Saints Day Observed
Revelation 7:9-17

A GREAT MULTITUDE

When we started our Wednesday night study of C.S. Lewis's book *Mere Christianity*, I told the class that there would be parts where I disagree with Lewis, and that they were free to as well. Remember Presbyterianism 101: God alone is Lord of the conscience and God leaves the conscience free from teachings created by humans that are not fundamentally founded in God's word. (PCUSA Constitution Part II, F-3.0101) So when we came to the part where Lewis talks about the second coming of Christ, I said this is one of those places. Lewis doesn't call it "end times" or Armageddon, but he does describe the second coming in militaristic terms, saying it will be an invasion that will strike the living Christians with overwhelming love but the unbelievers will suffer overwhelming horror. It's pretty clear Lewis understands the Book of Revelation as a prediction of terrible things that will happen before and at the time Jesus comes again. It may be surprising to learn that it is not. Hear what the Spirit says to the Church.

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." *The Word of God for the people of God.*

Sometime in the year before I went to seminary, I read the Bible cover to cover. I was totally surprised by it. I had known the basic stories like creation, slavery in Egypt, the life, death and resurrection, but I had no clue what it was really all about. Reading the Bible was a big part of the journey that led me to a life in ministry. It's hard to explain, but it was a means of grace for me, almost in the manner that Baptism and Communion are. But I also realized there was a whole lot of information in the Bible that I didn't understand. The Book of Revelation being maybe at the top of the list of things that seem to make no sense. I went to seminary before I had any idea that God was calling me to be a pastor, because I knew I had a lot to learn about the Bible and what it means to be a follower of Christ.

Fortunately, I learned early on in seminary that the Book of Revelation is not a book of predictions. The author was not looking into a crystal ball. It was never intended to be read literally. It is a description of a vision, and was written as a message of hope for a people who were suffering unspeakable persecution and oppression that no one who has been born and raised in modern day western civilization can even begin to understand.

Ultimately the point of the book of Revelation is that no matter how bad things get, the goodness and mercy of God in Christ will prevail. I was like whew. I don't have to worry about trying to make sense of all these talking animals and beasts with 10 horns and 7 heads. (Rev. 13:1).

Still, there has been a lot of scholarly work on the Book of Revelation (the end times novels by Tim LeHaye? Not among those scholarly pursuits) and there is a message in it that is just as important for 21st century Americans as it was for the original audience. John says in this vision, he *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.*

Robed in white and carrying palm branches is code for it was one big party going on. They are celebrating. This great multitude from every nation and tribe and people and languages, not just Christians. So many that the writer cannot even put a number on them. The great multitude is celebrating because they are in the court of the kingdom of God. Revelation is about end times, but it is not about a future calamity. It is about end times when Christ's reign will ultimately prevail. It is also about present day end times that everyone experiences even as life goes on. It is about the hope that is always present, both in the now and in the not yet.

A pastor named Dennis Sanders describes this present time end time concept. He started a new church development that seemed at first to be taking off. But then the growth in membership that had seemed so promising turned into decline. The pastor and a core group of members decided to close the church. It did not feel good. They had hoped it would be a long-lasting ministry. The world he had known for three years, had sunk his heart and soul into, was ending. But in the midst of his pain, he came to hear about ways the Grace of God had worked in that ministry to change people's lives. People who had felt rejected by the church and estranged from God had found renewal and recommitted themselves to following Christ. The pastor said the closing of the new church was a hard ending, but it was also a good ending. It was a sneak preview of the big party God will be throwing in the future. For him and the church, it was a present day end time that became the embodiment of the constant hope we have in Christ.

Christ walks with us, shares our troubles and surprises us with glimmers of light in the darkest days, giving us hope in this life. Christ will come again. And Surprise! It will be a time of great joy among the multitudes, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, those who are living at the time and those who have gone before. You don't have to believe that to be a Christian. It is your conscience. I'm not telling you what you have to believe. But who wouldn't want to? This story of universal salvation and the surprising light of Christ that shines through in this world and the next. It is all good news.