

Revelation 7:9-12

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.”

1 John 3:1-3

1 See what love the Father 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. 2 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. 3 And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.

Matthew 5:1-12

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. 2 Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

3 “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

4 “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

5 “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

6 “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

7 “Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

8 “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

9 “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

10 “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

11 “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. 12 Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Sermon Message for November 1, 2020 - All Saints' Day
Pleasant Street UMC and St. Luke's UMC
Pastor Ben Daggett
"Hope Eternal"

Today's message is called "Hope Eternal." How is your soul today? Are you resting in an eternal hope? Does God's Spirit bear witness to your spirit that you are a child of God? In our text from Revelation today, we catch a glimpse of the writer's vision of heaven, as he beheld a multitude of people, from every nation, every tribe, every language - all glorifying God and praising his name - God, the author of salvation, God on the throne, and the Lamb who was slain. Angels and elders cannot contain their joy, and supernatural beings sing of God's goodness and grace. No, in this glimpse of heaven we see that God was not voted in, there was no peaceful transfer of power, but rather, Jesus' moment of glory revealed something wholly different: the scene on the cross displays the depths of human depravity plainly against the light of unconditional, selfless, redeeming love in Christ.

On the cross we see exposed the senseless violence which masquerades as justice and delusive religious piety conspiring together to amass the worldly powers in full opposition to God - the cross displays the depths of human hostility against the Author of Life, against the Anointed One, obedient to God, and the cross makes clear God's willingness to take it all upon himself, all the disgrace and fear and sin, all leveled on him, so that we human beings might know the depths and riches of God's perfect love and grace. Death is defeated! It's a strange story, to be sure, and one as if from a foreign land. It's a story that unnerves us, unsettles us, exposes our hearts, even as it brings us hope.

Have you had a glimpse of that Revelation scene, of people from every nation praising God with hearts ablaze with joy? Have your eyes beheld the vision of glory of the eternal realm, to know beyond any shade of a doubt that you, yes you, have nothing to fear, in light of God's love? If you have not, or you're unsure, then you and the founder of Methodism, John

Wesley, are in good company. In his early years of ministry, the year 1735, Wesley undertook a voyage across the Atlantic Ocean from his home in England to the new colony of Georgia in America, to serve as curate to an Anglican church in the city of Savannah, just three years after the city's founding. It was on that four-month long ocean trip that Wesley came to grips with the reality that he, in fact, feared death.

From Wesley's journal:

Sunday, Nov 23, 1735

"At night I was awakened by the tossing of the ship and roaring of the wind, and plainly showed I was unfit, for I was unwilling, to die."¹

Now we may hear that entry from his journal or others like it and think, from our comfortable, self-assured 21st century perspective: "Well, yes, but you do know that John Wesley had some compulsive tendencies, and maybe he was a little harder on himself than most of us." And maybe there is some truth to that, but I believe the questions that haunted him, that disquieted his heart and troubled his spirit were the result of something simpler and, even childlike in its curiosity about himself: should I, a Christian, fear death? If God's assurance of pardon, if God's glorious salvation for sinners in the person and work of Jesus Christ is so powerfully proclaimed from the pages of the Bible, if I have heard that message, received it, and have devoted my life to the work of sharing such Good News from God, the news that death is defeated in Christ Jesus, and when faced with the prospect of death at sea in ocean storms I in fact fear death, then what is wrong? Why is there such a wide disconnect between my professed belief and my actions in the moment, the posture of my heart? Something is amiss.

Wesley and his brother Charles, along with their close companions on ship, had carefully organized every hour of their day to prayer, Bible study, and other godly pursuits for the four-month long trip. These were pious

¹ John Wesley; *The Journal of John Wesley*; Moody Press, Chicago; pg 35

individuals, devoted to God and to serving those around them from their youth. They were scholars and ordained ministers, responding to an invitation to serve the church in this new English colony in America. On this particular voyage at sea there were 80 English on board and 26 Moravians, German missionaries making their way to the colony to minister to Native Americans. Blogger David Jacobson writes of Wesley, during this journey, that:

“Right away, John set himself to occupying every hour of the day with purposeful activity, as he wanted to be obedient to Ephesians 5:16 (in the KJV, “Redeeming the time, because the days are evil”). John, Charles, and a few of their companions would rise at 4am for an hour of private prayer before studying the bible together from 5 to 7. After breakfast, they would lead about 40 passengers in morning prayer. From 9 to 12, they would study Biblical Greek or German (to speak to the Moravians, presumably), write sermons, read a religious book, or teach the children. At noon they gave an account for how they had been spending their time. From after eating until 4 they would read and minister to others on the ship. At 4 was the public evening prayer. From 5 to 6 was private prayer again. From 6 to 7 was more reading to other passengers. From 7 to 8 was the Moravian service. At 8, the group met again to strengthen, encourage, and correct one another. At 9, it was time for bed. Don’t you get tired just thinking about it?”²

For one so devoted to the cause of Christ and personal disciplines of piety, we can understand Wesley’s concern when subjecting himself to examination. Why, when facing death, should I fear it, if what I profess to believe is true? But he had seen a certain quality among those Moravians on board that had captivated his spirit and fueled his dismay. About two months after the above entry, still on board the ship, he writes:

Sunday, Jan 25, 1736

² <https://lansdowneumc.org/2018/05/03/john-wesley-goes-to-georgia/>

"At noon our third storm began. At four it was more violent than before. At seven I went to the Germans. I had long before observed the great seriousness of their behavior. Of their humility they had given a continual proof by performing those servile offices for the other passengers, which none of the English would undertake; for which they desired and would receive no pay, saying, 'it was good for their proud hearts,' and 'their loving Saviour had done more for them.' And every day had given them an occasion of showing a meekness which no injury could move. If they were pushed, struck, or thrown down, they rose again and went away; but no complaint was found in their mouth. There was now an opportunity of trying whether they were delivered from the spirit of fear, as well as from that of pride, anger and revenge.

"In the midst of the psalm wherewith their service began, the sea broke over, split the mainsail in pieces, covered the ship, and poured in between the decks, as if the great deep had already swallowed us up. A terrible screaming began among the English. The Germans calmly sang on. I asked one of them afterward, 'Were you not afraid?' He answered, 'I thank God, no.' I asked, 'But were not your women and children afraid?' He replied, mildly, 'No; our women and children are not afraid to die.'³

Contrasted with his own heart, Wesley knew that these Moravians were embodying and experiencing their faith in ways that he had yet to know for himself, and he very honestly writes of it in his journal. After arriving in Georgia, Wesley once again meets a Moravian missionary, who asks him a few simple questions.

Saturday, Feb 7 1736 "Mr. Oglethorpe returned from Savannah with Mr. Spangenberg, one of the pastors of the Germans. I soon found what spirit he was of and asked his advice with regard to my own conduct. He said, 'My brother, I must first ask you one or two questions. Have you the witness within yourself? Does the Spirit of God bear witness with your spirit that you are a child of God?' I was surprised, and knew not what to answer.

³ *Ibid.* 35-36

He observed it and asked, ‘Do you know Jesus Christ?’ I paused and said, ‘I know he is the Saviour of the world.’ ‘True,’ replied he; ‘but do you know He has saved you?’ I answered, ‘I hope he has died to save me.’ He only added, ‘Do you know yourself?’ I said, ‘I do.’ But I fear they were vain words.”⁴

Wesley’s time in Georgia is beset with trials, and he feels a failure at his primary hope, which was to serve as a missionary to Native Americans. Further complicating things, a failed romance with the Chief Magistrate’s niece and his refusal to serve her communion leads to legal troubles and his eventual flight from Georgia, again fearing for his life.

On ship a year and a half after his arrival in Georgia, now heading back to England, he writes: “I went to America, to convert the Indians; but oh! Who shall convert me? Who, what is he that will deliver me from this evil heart of mischief? I have a fair summer religion. I can talk well; nay, and believe myself, while no danger is near; but let death look me in the face, and my spirit is troubled. Nor can I say, ‘To die is gain!’”⁵

I appreciate Wesley’s honesty here, and his humility to write out his own doubts and fears for us to read in posterity. His story would change, as you may know, and though these heart questions would pursue him for the entirety of his time as parish minister and hopeful missionary to Native Americans in Georgia, and once again on his return voyage through stormy seas to England, he would eventually come to know with great assurance that the words of the Bible, Jesus’ word of redeeming love was indeed true for him.

1 John 3:1-3

1 See what love the Father 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. 2 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

⁴ *Ibid.* 36-37

⁵ *Ibid.* 53

revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. 3 And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.

Can I say that I know the assurance that so motivated the Moravians on that ship, to carry out acts of kindness, to sing quiet hymns and remain steady in the face of death? An honest inquiry makes it clear: I do not. Most days I find myself asking along with Wesley: "Who, what is he that will deliver me from this evil heart of mischief?" But God. Still, the witness of the saints, of the believers who have gone before us, of those who gather here in this space and through the web, of friends and family, of my wife, all of it displays the pervasive and all consuming love of God - even toward this sinner.

When my grandmother, Ruth Ostrander, already in her 99th year, was nearing her final days on earth at my parents' home in Connecticut, she underwent a transformation so palpable that visitors to the house would no sooner cross the threshold into our kitchen than remark at the tangible sense of God's presence in that space. For grandma's final three weeks she ceased eating and slept for 21 or 22 of 24 hours each day. But for the hour or two of wakefulness in the afternoons she was radiant with love and joy. She looked 10 years younger, even. Her time of sleep so clearly brought her to visions akin to those of our reading today from Revelation, that she would take our hands in hers and grip them tightly, saying, "I love you so much!" And she couldn't wait to "go home" as she put it. She knew what awaited her there, and just Who would receive her, and she wanted all of us around her to know we had nothing to fear.

Why do we close our hearts to the all-consuming love of God? For what reason do we set our minds on the things of this world, and eat mud pies when God has prepared a banquet of love and grace, if we would but turn to him and let go of all the sin that only hinders, deceives, and entangles us in pain, separation, and grief?

Put your hope in God. "All who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure." John Wesley came to grips with the disconnect between

his words and deeds and his earnest hope in Christ ultimately proved secure. His life, upon receiving God's assurance of Christ's perfect love, would never be the same. The Methodist movement God sparked in Wesley would transform England, sweep through this nation and all around the world.

How often do we find, in all our pursuit of God, that God was the one pursuing us all along?

Are you worried about Election Day this coming Tuesday? Do you fear that perilous and drowning waters may engulf this nation, no matter the outcome? Are you concerned about the pandemic, isolation, the other health crises tied to fear of public spaces, unemployment, race tensions, fascists, marxists, fear-mongering media and divisive discourse? Put your hope in God. Hope eternal. "All who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure." Wesley's experience reminds us that this is a process which may take some time. But don't be afraid of the tension, of the disconnect, of the doubt. Name it (if it's there) and put your hope in God. Red or blue on the other side of this year's election, God is on the throne, and your hope in God is an eternal hope.

To close, I would ask you: how is it with your soul? Please, if you find it's rocky in there, reach out to me, reach out to others in the church, but reach out. Milka and I love to visit you. I can attest that she is a powerful witness of God's unconditional, radiant love, and we are on this journey together, all of us. A divided nation needs to see that the all-consuming love and hope we have in Christ is true, is real, is eternal. Whatever the outcome (or delay of outcome with this election) pray for the one who wins, pray for the nation, and put your hope in God.