

Sermon 11-7-21
Dwight Hughes preaching

All Saints Sunday
November 7, 2021
Rev. Dr. Dwight A. Hughes

- Sermon Text: Revelation 7:9-14
- Sermon Title: “Look Within”
- Focus Verses: Revelation 7:13

BACKGROUND:

Scholars remind us that “God gave the revelation, God gave his plan for the end of the world to Jesus, and Jesus in turn *revealed* it to John.” We find this narrative in what can be a very challenging book to explore and make sense of due to its apocalyptic style – the use of mysterious symbols. We find in chapter six the breaking or opening of the first five of the seven seals of judgement. Feel free to revisit those later. However, today’s text seems to be an interlude of sorts – an intervening episode that happens *before* the seventh seal of the scroll was opened and explained. It seems one goal of this interlude (this intervening episode) is to essentially remind the listener and us today that the people of God, the faithful, the Saints of old and “those still striving” will be preserved at the judgement.

This apocalyptic genre is not the easiest of the Jewish literature to access, but I found it fascinating for two reasons. First, its use of mysterious symbols, numbers, and word pictures which sparked my imagination, a divine technology of sorts to capture its message and meaning. And finally, the fact that John, the one chosen to *receive* the revelation is both observer and participant.

This disciple is literally in the space, on the ground seeing this unfolding of God’s plan firsthand. I imagine it is like you and I having a vivid dream where we are both an observer and a participant– seeing ourselves in the very clips that are being played before us akin to a virtual reality with phenomenal graphics, wearable technology, and gesture recognition. Friends, this had to have been cool, divine technology on a heaven-like stage; absent the worry of losing connection due to the phenomenal streaming capacity and cloud-based storage which was ahead of our time.

INTRODUCTION:

At the beginning of Chapter 7, the sixth seal had been opened and view of the great earthquake was seen “stars falling, mountains shifting and people running,” sheer pandemonium, and the interlude begins (REV. 6:12b-16, Message Bible). Instead of *ushers* standing at the entry points of this heavenly stage, Revelation 7:1 record, “*angels* standing at four corners of the earth

holding back the four winds that were abruptly ordered *not* to be released rather, to wait before harming the land until the Seal of God was placed on the foreheads of the saints,” implying membership in God’s household, a sign of God’s ownership (REV. 7:1-3, New Living Translation & Commentary). And so, John, the son of Zebedee and the brother of James, sees a *diverse* crowd of people from every nation, tribe, and language standing before the throne and before the lamb (REV. 7:9, New Living Translation). He is literally on and emersed in this mammoth stage witnessing the sights, hearing the throngs of angels chanting, and seeing the elders’ worship, bowing with their faces to the ground shouting, “Salvation comes from our God who sits on the throne and from the lamb” (REV. 7:10, New Living Translation). Imagine an arial vivid view of this unfolding drama, “God and Jesus at the center and a sea of people surrounding them. Angels are surrounding the sea of people all in white robes holding palm branches in their hands.”

Can’t you see it?

Can’t you see the great expanse?

Can’t you see the opulence of the golden throne?

Can’t you hear the harps,

Can’t you smell the incense and see its smoke as it rises and meanders in the atmosphere...

Friends, it is in the midst of these sights and thunderous sound, it is in the midst of this glorious expanse that John, an eyewitness to the life, death and resurrection of Christ is asked two simple questions. “Who are they and where did they come from?” What’s the saying, there are no dumb questions? Okay, but what was going on here? Questions do have their place. From the innocent unfiltered ones of the young, to the strategic inquiries of experts and lifelong learners like ourselves. We cannot faithfully navigate this thing called life without *asking* questions, especially when we must contend with:

Managing a Pandemic and masks mandates

Making sense of an Insurrection on our nation’s capital

And having to monitor the quality of policing in our world and community.

We cannot do justice, love mercy, and walk humble before an almighty God (MIC.6:8) and *not* call into question voter suppression tactics and the racial hostility rooted in fear, theories and privilege. Asking questions have their place, especially when we are perplexed, overwhelmed, and grappling with the world’s systems, and yes, the inherent, unexpected twists, turns and transitions of life. But allow me to normalize our propensity to ask questions. We are not the only ones who are fed up. Look at Revelation 6:10. Those martyred for the word of God, those killed for being faithful shouted, “how long O Sovereign Lord before you judge those who belong to the world, how long before you avenge our blood? How long before you step in and punish our murderers? Look at Revelation 6:15-17. “When the sky rolled up like a scroll, when

the stars fell, when the moon and sun turned” black and bloody respectively, when “everyone and his dog ran for cover—kings, commoner, slave and free.” The text says, “they hid themselves in caves and asked, who can stand,” who is able to survive? Even Jesus uttered a question on the cross. “It was the ninth hour and there was darkness over all the land and Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, “Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani? That is, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” (MAR. 15:34)

Beloved, questions certainly have their place. So why these two posed by the unnamed elder – “Who are they? And where did they come from?” (REV. 7:13). John, the son of Zebedee, John an eyewitness to the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, John the one chosen to reveal God’s plan is questioned about the unveiling, he is questioned about the revelation for which he had nothing to do with other than being an observer and participant. He was not the orchestrator of this heavenly drama. Maybe He was flooded, maybe he was caught up in the moment. After all that was much to hear, see, sense, and feel.

- The expanse
- The opulence
- The atmosphere

I imagine his neurons were firing in his brain due to this level of stimulation and engagement, so much so that he was clueless in the moment as to who they were and where they were from. On the one hand I get it. I can see how he was taken aback; I can see how he was alarmed by the question, but when I step back, slow down and reflect,

- when I allow myself to connect with the breath of life within me,
- when I connect with the person of the Holy Spirit that is within - the counselor, advocate, the teacher something happens.

When I step back, slow down and make room for the comforter, keeper, and mediator to illuminate and guide me, I begin to ask how is it that he does not know? How is it he did not *at minimum* make an educated guess?

After all, he himself said “God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have *everlasting life* (JOH. 12:25). How can he not know, when Jesus predicted his death John recorded Jesus’s words, “He who loves his life will lose it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. If anyone serves Me, let him follow Me; and where I am, there My servant will be also” (JOH.12:25). How can he not know? He recorded, “My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. And I give them eternal life, they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand (JOH. 10:27).

Friends, I contend that if we could rewind the clip of this great narrative and invite John a prolific writer and eyewitness, one steeped in the very things of God to *step back, to slow down*

and reflect, if we could rewind the clip and invite him to connect with himself and the person of the Holy Spirit, if he could just *look within*, I contend that he would not only be able to propose a solid answer, he would tap into his ability to make sense of the matter at hand.

I believe John had everything necessary within to answer the elder's question, as one created in the very image of God, as one imbued by the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. And I believe the same is true for you and me, as we navigate this threshold – this period of being betwixt and between on so many levels given our pandemic reality, given our pivot stress to make life happen in these unprecedented times.

“Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the lord will deliver him out of them all” (PSA.34:19) So, let “do justice, love, mercy and walk humbly” before our Creator, Sustainer, Redeemer (MIC. 6:8). Let us not “grow weary in doing good” for something happens when we “look within. “The bible says, the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father has sent will teach us all things, the Holy Spirit will bring to our remembrance all things that Christ has said (JOH. 14:26).

Thy Word have I hid in my heart that I may not sin against thee (PSA.119:11). Thy Word is a lamp unto our feet and light onto our path (PSA. 19:105). Let us not grow weary in doing good. “For we have this treasure in earthen vessels, to show that the transcendent power belongs to God not us” (2 CO. 4:7-9).

“Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight. In all your ways acknowledge him and he will make straight your paths.” “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you” (LUK. 6:31).

Don't grow weary and restless, rather “quite the mine and the soul will speak.”

AMEN.