

Revelation 7:9-17 Pastor Bill Uetricht 10/29.20 All Saints

When Bev and I first became parents, we committed ourselves to being modern parents who would use the tool of “time out” to deal with the misbehavior of our kids. If they had done something wrong, they would take a period of “time out” to reflect on their wrongs and to disrupt their unhelpful behavior. I am not so sure how well it worked, especially for one of them, for whom “time out” seemed like an impossible task and an eternity.

Now, whether time out as a behavior management tool is really effective, I am not certain. But taking a time out is probably not a bad idea, and frankly, sometimes a necessity. What we have in the reading from the book of Revelation today is a matter of the writer, the seer, John, taking a literary time out. He has just told us about the opening of six seals. Now these seals aren't barking animals; they are what keep closed the book that is revealing what is to come. Think of them as some kind of tape. When the seals are opened, we are given a glimpse of what is to transpire. Well, the sixth seal has just been opened, and if you know anything about Biblical numbers you would realize that some really bad stuff has probably just occurred. The number six is the number of evil in Revelation. So, the world has been visited by the awful. Life seems terrible. You read this portion of Revelation, and you think that you can't take anymore.

Well, the author of Revelation gives you a break, a time out. He provides you the opportunity to take a breath, a heavenly breath. In the midst of all of the trauma, the big ordeal, we are taken to heaven and given a vision of that realm, not so we can escape the earth, but so that we can live our daily lives more confidently, more resiliently. Right before we are given this interlude, this time out, we confront these words: “For the great day of wrath has come, and who is able to stand?”

Now I have to tell you that when I read those words earlier in the week, something stirred in my spirit. They spoke to me so resolutely. Who is going to be able to stand? Sometimes I wonder about that these days. The great ordeal seems to be occurring. The sixth seal feels like it has been opened. We haven't heard of many earthquakes, but, wow, everything else seems to be occurring. Doesn't it feel like the sun is becoming as black as sackcloth, and the full moon becoming like blood? Doesn't it feel like the stars of the sky are falling to the earth? Doesn't it feel like the sky is vanishing like a scroll rolling itself up, and every mountain and island being removed from its place? Doesn't it feel like the kings of the earth, the generals, the rich and the powerful ought to go hide themselves in caves?

These are the things happening after the sixth seal is opened in the book of Revelation. And while this may be overstatement on my part and our part, it seems that these apocalyptic realities are occurring in our days. The world as we knew it is being transformed right before our very eyes. It's frightening, and we wonder, "Who will be able to stand?" We wonder whether we will be able to stand. I wonder if I will be able to stand.

The vision given by Revelation in our little time out is a marvelous scene of a multicultural, multilingual gathering that includes so many people that they can't be counted. They are from all tribes and all nations. And what are they doing? Singing! Oh, I can't wait until we all can sing together again. They are singing, "Salvation (i.e., victory) belongs to our God who is seated on the throne and to the Lamb!"

Victory doesn't belong to the destruction all around them. Victory doesn't belong to the forces of evil. Victory doesn't belong to the oppressive powers, the Romans. Victory belongs to God. Now when I say that it feels somewhat cheap to me. When I was ordained into the ministry, I was charged not to provide people with "illusory

hope,” hope that is just a matter of positive thinking, of pretending that the problems aren’t real, that they will just disappear by means of a happy thought. What we are going through will not just disappear by happy thoughts. This is real stuff, real pain, real suffering.

It was real stuff, real suffering for the early Christians who received the book of Revelation, folks marginalized by the Roman authorities who were insisting that they participate in the worship of the leader, the emperor. When the seer, John, seeks to discover who the folks are dressed in white and singing of God’s victory, we are told: “these are they who [are coming out] of the great ordeal.” It does not say, “who *came* out of the great ordeal,” as if that ordeal were a thing of the past. They are continuing to come out of the ordeal.

People of true faith are not starry-eyed. We experience great suffering. We’re in the midst of it. I’m in the midst of it. The struggle is real for me as I am performing far too many funerals, as I am wondering what the future of the church will be, as I am longing for the days of the return of people, the return of singing, the return of real connection, the return of being able to feel complete joy, not questioning every move I make.

It’s interesting to note that according to the singers in heaven, the victory belongs to God *and* to the lamb. The lamb. In other portions of Revelation, we are told that the lamb is a *slain* lamb, a killed one, a crucified one. The victory belongs to the one who has gone through the suffering, the one who has endured the pain. And this one is a *lamb*. Wow! Not a tiger, not a lion, not a bear. But a lamb. Do you catch the vision of not only Revelation, but of the entire Christian faith? The victory belongs not to the loudest, the most bombastic, the richest, the most powerful, the most together, or the even most popular. As the Beatitudes from Matthew teach us today, the blessed are the poor in spirit, the meek, the mourning. The blessed is a crucified lamb. The

blessed is the one who is in there with us, in the midst of the suffering, in the pain, in the midst of what feels like a never-ending pandemic. Salvation belongs to God and to the lamb.

Who are these who are dressed in white and singing with an amazing multicultural gathering? They are those who are coming out of the great ordeal. They are us--us who have bathed in the suffering love of God discovered in Jesus, us who are accompanied by a slain lamb, one who knows what we are going through, one who cries our tears and promises one day to wipe every tear from our eyes.

Who will be able to stand? I don't know for sure because, you know, sometimes it is hard to get up. Sometimes the struggle and the pain seem overwhelming. Sometimes I need a couple of hands to get me up on my feet.

I remember when I was serving at Peace in Toledo performing a funeral for a man who had been shot and killed. He had had alcohol and drug problems. He was a man who spoke so assuredly about his faith and his relationship with Jesus. But he couldn't stand. I know I irritated one of his relatives because in my sermon I said that Juan didn't win the battle; it overcame him. That kind of talk wasn't what they knew to be Christian talk. Christians overcome; they are victorious. Well, Juan is dead because he wasn't. Addiction and the violence that accompany addiction won. But I reminded them that the true victory doesn't belong to Juan, but belongs to God and to the lamb, the suffering lamb.

My ability to stand is not simply about me, my strength, my resilience. Oh, I like it when I can get myself up, when I can pull myself up by the proverbial bootstraps. I like it when we I feel within me the power to overcome, the power to be resilient. And I don't like it when in a culture like ours we cripple people, when we don't encourage them

to discover the means to be resilient. But ultimately, the victory belongs to God and to the lamb, not to us and our abilities.

Maybe those who can stand are those who are able to trust that. And by the way, trusting that involves a recognition that, indeed, the blest are the poor in spirit, the grieving, the meek. Blest are those who know that we are in this together, that I can lend you my hand when you can't get up, and you can lend me your hand when I can't get up. And then maybe we will be answer the question, "Who can stand?" Us...together.

Whoa! That was the kind of *time out* that I need!