
“Needed to See”

A SERMON on Revelation 7:9-17 for the 4th Sunday of Easter, Year C
Preached 11 May 2025 by the Rev. Matthew Emery, Lead Minister
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I’m not exactly sure what I expected—what I was imagining would happen—as Adam and I drove out “*there*” on a frosty November morning some 15 years ago. We had just spent the American Thanksgiving Day with my parents and my sister, in my hometown in central Michigan. A long, long drive laid ahead of us, as Adam and I set off to swing down into Ohio, and then up across New York State, before finally getting to Connecticut where we would start an entirely new chapter in our lives. But there was another important stop to make first, just a few miles from my parents’ home. And so, just a few minutes into the drive, I turned the car away from the freeway and trekked down the country road toward a little village known as North Star. A right turn at the four-way stop in the middle of town, and then a left onto the dirt road just on the out-skirts, and then we were there: rolling up, on that crisp, late-November morning, into the North Star Township cemetery.

The last time I had been at the North Star cemetery had been about 6 months earlier. That time, I had arrived there not driving my own car, but riding in the back seat of the huge canary-yellow 1977 Buick Electra that belonged to my grandmother. In the front seat were my dad and his stepbrother, my uncle. Ahead of us was the hearse carrying her body. Behind us was a procession of fellow mourners, a line of cars so long it stretched just shy of a mile at one point. Behind us also was the jam-packed funeral home in which I and the director of the senior centre had presided over her funeral—grandma wasn’t much of a church-goer, herself. And ahead of us would be a wonderful reception at said senior centre with many people who hadn’t seen each other in a long, long time. Behind us was 105 years of earthly life for Vivian Lucile Walters Hartsaw Emery—yes, a hundred and five. Ahead of us would be that moment when all of us gathered would scatter again, some of us probably never to see one another again.

But all of those things had all been back on a sunny, warm May afternoon some six months earlier. Indeed, we all *had* scattered. I myself had not been back to the area since. For whatever reason, though, it felt important to me that I go back there to that cemetery that November morning as we made our way out of town. Perhaps it was to say the “goodbye” that I never had quite fully been able to say because I’d been drafted into leading the funeral. Perhaps it was to make a final stop by “grandma’s place”, so to speak, as I left the Midwest for good to make the trek out to a new life in a new land. Perhaps it was simply to remember. Or perhaps I just needed to see this place, one more time.

The hearers and readers who first received the visions recorded by John of Patmos—John “the divine” as he is sometimes called—in the book of Revelation, they needed to *see* as well. They needed a vision: a vision of what was still to come, when all they knew in the present was the persecution of the early Christian community. In the face of struggle and oppression, rejection and death, they needed a vision that pointed toward hope for the ultimate future—that future that was God’s ultimate culmination of all that was and is and is to come.

Now, the visions painted in the book of Revelation are complicated and, to be honest, rather obscure, confusing, and downright bizarre. As you are probably aware, there are some Christians out there who get all caught up in trying to interpret every little detail, from what all the different creatures represent to laying out a timeline for how it all happens and even to making a claim for how many get “saved” in the end. But, not to be too harsh on fellow sisters and brothers in Christ, all of that sort of talk is entirely misguided, quite frankly. From the outset, the writer of Revelation is clear that this is a “vision”—something like a dream, if you will. As a dream-vision, the important thing is not all the crazy details, but the overall point of it all, the overall message it gives.

And in Revelation, the message is actually pretty simple: God wins.

We see that overall message shine through in a couple of key places, amidst all the other obscure details. One is in a beloved passages at the end of the book, a well-known section that we’ll hear from next Sunday where John tells us that he “saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away”, and the holy city, a new Jerusalem, and—perhaps most importantly—that the home of God would be among mortals and death would be no more.

But another place is in this passage we heard this morning from chapter 7. As the plot and the tension in Revelation are heightening, everyone on the earth from kings to slaves sees that a “great day of ... wrath” is coming”. And, as they see it coming, they cry out with what might be the ultimate question: “who is able to stand?”

Who is able to stand when the day of the Lord comes?

Who is able to stand at the end of all things?

Who is able to stand?

And then the author, the bearer of this dream-vision testifies: “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.”

That is who is able to stand: a great multitude that no one can count, from every nation, all tribes and peoples. You know, day in and day out, as we go about life, we don’t always feel like beloved children of God. Many of us are all too aware of our own foibles and failings. And more than that, even when we’re not caught by our own brokenness, we suffer under the brokenness of our world—disease, war, hunger, broken relationships, addictions, economic injustice.

But who is able to stand through all this? “After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count.” And moreover, “these are they who have come out of the great ordeal.” In other words, there seems to be no ordeal, no tribulation or brokenness or wrath that can overcome the reality that God wins, and God’s ultimate desire is to redeem all creation.

The people who the book of Revelation was written for, they needed to see this vision: this vision of hope and redemption and joy, this vision of the great multitude who would be able to stand. It meant that they would be able to stand, no matter what had happened or was still yet to happen, just as it means the same for you and me and all of us today. They needed this vision, this vision that, in the end of all things, we will all be caught up in ministering to and with God... and that, as we join with God in that praise-filled ministry, every tear will be wiped away. For those

people for whom and among whom Revelation was written, things seemed pretty dire for their world at that moment and for the path of life through it they had to walk. God, however, did not leave them with nothing. Even when all else seemed to be gone, they were not without hope, without a hope given to them from the very heart of God.

That is the vision that we remember each and every time we gather together for worship. We join the great multitude, standing before God's throne, that great cloud of witnesses crying out our "Amens!", that countless throng who Christ leads to the waters of life. This vision from Revelation is the vision of what our worship this day and every time we gather is all about. Moreover, this vision stands before us as the goalpost to which we trust God is moving us and all things, the whole of creation, even. Our hope that, somehow, in some time and in some way, ultimately God wins... ultimately... this is the hope that allows us to keep moving forward, with all that is behind and all that is yet to come, even through those things that seem quite the opposite of such victory.

But there is one more needful thing, my friends. The truth is that just like the people for whom Revelation was written needed a vision... just like myself those many years ago needed to see... there is a hurting world out there that needs a vision of hope. And so we gather this day and every time we come together not only to be guided to the water of life *ourselves*, but to be fed for the journey so that we might go out and help all the world to see, to vision, to dream... to know that indeed "Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!"