



“Sing a Song of Salvation”

Fourth Sunday of Easter
Saturday & Sunday, May 11–12, 2019
All Services
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Camp Hill, Pennsylvania

Revelation 7:9-17; John 10:22-30

Grace to you and peace, from God who is, who was, and who is to come. Amen.

The early church was under attack. It was becoming common for fellow believers to be arrested, tortured, killed, even in the name of the emperor. The people were suffering, losing

hope. Too much time had passed since those people who actually knew Jesus, those folks who had walked with him, and talked with him, and actually, physically, *touch*ed him, had been alive. Most of those people were, as Saint Paul wrote, “asleep in Christ.”

The followers of The Way were seen to be as a cult. They were an *illegal* religion, an unsupported offshoot of Judaism. Judaism had official dispensation - they were not required to make sacrifices to the emperor, so long as they paid their taxes. Christianity had no such dispensation. So, when Christians refused to make the sacrifices to the emperor, claiming religious exception, they were assumed to be working *against* the Roman government.

From the middle/late of the first century, on into nearly the third century, how to deal with adherents to followers of this Jesus the Christ were left to the whims of local officials as to how harshly punishments were carried out. Some places, some government servants, were more zealous than others. But when it's *your* door that's being pounded on in the middle of the night by armed military people, it doesn't really matter a whole lot who your local Roman government officials might be.

The author of Revelation was writing to a church, writing to a people, who were under attack. The author sees the stress they are all living in, the attacks happening to individuals, and to the church as a whole. So, the author is striving to encourage all of them, to give them hope for the present; hope for the future. That's what I see, when I read the book of Revelation. It's not trying to predict what is to come. It's saying, rather, that Believers will Never fit into this world that works against God, this world that is like the scribes and pharisees that Jesus was talking to in our gospel lesson - those sheep that do not belong to Jesus., that work *against* God. But, says the author, have faith; hold onto your courage; have hope.

Let's take a quick look at the lead into our passage. There are three authors named John in the New Testament: John the writer of the gospel; John the author of the three letters; and John of the book of Revelation. They might be the same person, they might not, we don't

really know. It's a good name, though. The name of the book is simply *The Revelation of John*. In Greek, it's technically *The Apocalypse of John*. Apocalypse means "revelation" or "vision," and that's what the book is: really one long vision. And it's singular, not plural - one long vision.

An angel is John's guide throughout the vision. At the point where our reading picks up at chapter 7, there's already been a bunch of things that have happened. There have already been letters sent to a bunch of churches in Asia Minor; John has seen the throne in heaven; and he's encountered the Lamb (which was representing Christ) and watched Christ unroll a scroll declaring that "persons from every tribe and language and people and nation" were made worthy through the blood of the Lamb. Then a bunch of seals, or omens, were opened and discussed, specifically the Four Horsemen that you've probably heard about: War Famine Pestilence, and Death.

But then we get to chapter 7, which is where our reading comes from. But our reading doesn't start at the beginning of the chapter. The chapter starts off with the promise of 144,000 males from the twelve tribes of Israel being among those who will defend the earth. Where does the 144,000 come from? If you remember from your confirmation days, there are the twelve tribes of Israel, who are descended from the twelve children of Jacob (who was renamed Israel). The 144,000 comes from 12,000 coming from each of those twelve tribes. So, twelve times 12,000 equals 144,000. And these are, very specifically, Jewish males.

Then we get to where our reading starts. Did you catch it? I know **I** didn't, the first couple of times I read it. The reading goes from 144,000 Israel males, to verse 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.

So, first, John sees people, the Jewish believers represented by the 144,000. And *then*, he's shown believers, from *all* tribes, not just the twelve of Israel; from *all* languages, not just Hebrew; a great multitude that **no one** could count, more than 144,000; all of them, standing before the Throne. In other words, people from all ethnicities, all languages, in the presence of Gd. Not Just *Jewish* believers. The message of Jesus' salvation is **Not Just** for Jewish believers, but for **All** those who would believe. All these believers gather around the throne, and they sing songs of praise and salvation. When asked who these people might be, John is very specifically told that these folks "come out of the great ordeal" - that is to say, these are martyrs. These are people who have died for their faith. And they come from all backgrounds, all languages, all genders, presumably all ages. They have come together, they are working together, they are glorifying and praising God and singing songs of salvation, **together**. They bring us hope, together.

One thing I do know we all need, and I really believe we can all agree on this, is that we need **Hope**. Because it really feels like we're a little short on that these days. I filled in for Pastor Horner at the Thursday Bible Study this week while he was at the Lead Pastor's Conference in California (yeah, feel sorry for him), and we were taking prayer requests. I had to be reminded to pray for yet *another* community that has been fractured due to a violent school encounter. It had slipped my mind, in part, because it's happened so many time - **Nineteen** school shootings in the United States so far this year alone. It happens so often that I'll bet many of you were like me: I shook my head, thought "not again," and then I moved on to the next

news story.

I do **Not** want to get off topic or stand up here say we need to ban all guns, because, first of all, I think that's simply stupid, and second of all, I don't agree with that. I don't have a problem with people owning most guns, or firearms in general. I do, *personally*, have a problem with advocating that **Any** adult should, and has a *constitutional right*, to own whatever firearm they want, regardless of whatever destructive caliber it may be. I *do not* believe that is what the authors of the constitution meant. What we *Do Need*, is to come up with a way for people to understand that guns are NOT the solution to a disagreement.

What I am trying to say here, is, that **we**, like the people in our reading who received John's Letter, need **hope**. We need the assurance, we need that song of salvation, that unity, that spirit of working together, that will bring us the joy, the hope, the expectation, the wisdom, the strength, the courage, to *rise up* together, to work to do the right thing in our lives in our communities, in our world - **Whatever** that "right thing" is.

That "right thing" is, I think, in part, making certain **all** people have enough to eat. I think that "right thing" is, in part, making certain that all people have a safe place to sleep, clean drinking water, and do not have to live in fear of their neighbor, or relative, or stranger. That "right thing" may well also be working together to bring about some commonsense laws on our books.

The right thing for John, that sweet song of salvation that John gave to his readers, was to give them a word of **hope**.

What is the song that, together, we can sing?

Amen.

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