

**FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
305 EAST MAIN STREET
DURHAM, NC 27701
PHONE: (919) 682-5511**



**All Saints Sunday with Communion
“Invisible Saints”
A sermon by Marilyn Hedgpeth**

**31st Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)
November 5, 2017**

Revelation 7: 9-17; Psalm 34: 1-10, 22; Matthew 5: 1-12

John, the author of the book of Revelation, himself an exile

on the Greek island of Patmos, is in a heightened state of spiritual awareness,
“in the Spirit”, as he calls it, when he is summoned to peer inside an open doorway,

to catch a glimpse of the throne-room of Heaven. (Rev. 4: 1-3)

And in that throne-room, he beholds “the One who sits on the throne”,

surrounded by 24 elders and other exotic heavenly creatures,

including a Lamb, looking as if it has been slain.

But this tattered Lamb, very much alive, takes a scroll

from the right hand of the One who sits on the throne,

and begins very methodically, one by one, to open each of seven seals,

to reveal the scroll’s contents to John.

When the Lamb breaches the sixth seal (Rev. 6: 12-17), there ensues a cosmic
apocalypse:

the sun turns black, the moon blood red, the earth quakes,
and stars fall from the sky, indicative of the coming
of the Day of the Lord.

Then it is revealed, that despite this day of judgment, that the living God
has given orders to spare from any harm 144,000 from the 12 tribes of Israel,
and to insure their protection by marking them
with a seal on their foreheads (Rev. 7:2-8).

At this point, John probably hangs his head and starts to sweat,
thinking that his goose is cooked for sure,
because who can be assured that they have made the cut with such slim odds.

“But after this”... our passage today begins, John lifts his head, takes a second look,
and low and behold, there is yet another group approaching the throne,
a multitude; no, a *great* multitude;
great, beyond throne room-mathematics; unaccountably great,
from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages,
standing before the Lamb, robed in white, waving palm branches
and joining the heavenly host in singing their doxologies.

And from amidst the din of doxologies, one of the elders shouts out to John,
“Who are *these* people?”

It's a great question, don't you think? Who are *these* people?

I turned to my husband when I was reading this initially and said,

"Isn't that a line from a movie we've seen?"

"Yes", he said, almost immediately. "It's from the first Austin Powers movie,

when Austin wakes up after being cryogenically asleep for thirty years,

and yells out, 'WHO ARE THESE PEOPLE?' "

To which Basil Exposition answers, "The shouting is a temporary side-effect

of the unfreezing." (*Austin Powers: International Man of Mystery*, 1997)

And so like Austin Powers, this single elder suddenly wakes up to a new reality,

and opens the eyes of John to this new reality as well:

that not only are there 144,000 people redeemed from harm by the One

who sits on the throne and the Lamb;

144,000 saints whom one might expect to see there in heaven;

but in addition, there is an even *greater* multitude, *invisible*, perhaps, to the naked eye,

undetectable at first glance, also singing their multi-lingual doxologies,

and worshipping God day and night in their various customs;

also robed in white; also worthy to be sheltered and protected,

fed and guided, comforted and cherished;

because *these people* have come through a great ordeal.

Why didn't they notice them the first time? Why didn't they see
these undocumented ones, who fall outside of the measured census of Israel?

Why didn't they realize before that the grace of the One who sits on the throne
far out-distances any human expectations?

Why didn't they imagine that there may be *no limit* to the number who will
be gathered-in by God's heavenly embrace?

Why were they largely unaware, unseeing, unnoticing, un-imagining
of the *all-encompassing compassion of a loving God*
who shelters those who come through great ordeals,
guides them to springs of life, and wipes away every tear from their eyes?

Why was their initial vision of God's chosen, God's saints, so limited?

Ai Weiwei, the dissident Chinese artist and activist,
has a new documentary coming out soon called *Human Flow*,
about our world's current refugee crisis.

It is his artistic vision, like John of Patmos' spiritual vision, of one year on our planet,
when *65 million people* are displaced from home, as they seek shelter,
seek safety for themselves and their families;
and as they seek their God-given dignity as children of the living God.

It relates stories from 23 countries of desperate people

from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, France, Greece, Germany, Iraq, Israel,
Italy, Kenya, Mexico and Turkey,
corralled into sub-standard refugee camps,
crowded into creaking boats crossing oceans,
hungry and huddled in tent cities on cardboard pallets,
shivering under silvery thermal blankets,
picking through garbage dumps, cowering under military watch,
yet bravely indomitable,
willing to pass their babies through barbed-wire barriers to freedom.

Ai Weiwei's vision seeks to answer this humanitarian question:

Will our global societies emerge from fear,
isolation, and self-interest to choose a path of openness, freedom,
and respect for humanity?

Who are *these people*? How do 65 million people go largely unnoticed?

How can most of us be so immune to human suffering; to those who have
come through great ordeals like persecution, warfare, slavery,
human trafficking, poverty, police brutality, imprisonment, torture,
starvation, neglect, fire, flood, and epidemic?

Ai Weiwei, himself a displaced person living in exile in Germany,
says that neither the phenomena of mass human migration,

nor the human tendency to passively ignore it, is new.

“It is endemic to the human condition”, he says.

(Buder, Emily. *The Atlantic*. “Humanity is Subjective”. October 14, 2017)

Yet it is *these* people whom the elder and John of Patmos take a second look at
and *see* in the holy throne-room vision of God.

It is these formerly invisible people who are seen by God,
who have their dignity restored, and who are assured that their lives matter
in God’s vision of the world.

No wonder they loudly sing their hallelujahs!

How can one be so blind to them? What will make all of God’s saints visible to us, too?

Asheville author, Alan Gatz, has written a book for young adults called *Refugee*.

It’s fiction, told through the eyes of three young teens,

but it conveys very real stories through three refugee families

fleeing towards the safety of the free world:

one family from Nazi Germany; one from communist Cuba; and one from Syria.

And the mantra arises time and again from the lips of these young teens in exile:

“They only see us when we do something they don’t want us to do...

When they stayed where they were supposed to be – in the ruins of Aleppo

or behind the fences of a refugee camp – people could forget about them,

but when refugees did something they didn't want them to do –

when they tried to cross the border into their country,

or slept on the front stoops of their shops, or jumped in front of their cars,

or prayed on the decks of their ferries –

that's when people couldn't ignore them any longer." (Gratz, Allen. *Refugee*. p. 214)

What will it take for us to see those who suffer from great afflictions in our midst,

sometimes living in our own neighborhoods, right under our noses,

and consider them as saints of God, to be fed and sheltered,

shepherded and guided, comforted and redeemed?

Can we see them before they have to act out and do something they are

not supposed to do, and respect them as saints, as beloved children of God?

This is the question, I think, the elder asks of John of Patmos in his vision:

"Who are these people and where did they come from?"

How can we see them? How can we know them?

How can we appreciate their journeys, and value their status in the heart of God?

I find Jesus to be extremely helpful at this point.

Jesus, the only-begotten One, begotten, not made, very God of very God,

is the One who expresses the heart-desire of very God in very human words.

One of the salient characteristics of Jesus, which I love, is that he sees *these people*,

recognizes *these people* as God's people,
knows innately from whence they have come,
engages and affirms them, and calls them *Blessed*:
the poor, the grieved and aggrieved, the meek, the righteous-robbed,
the hungry and thirsty, the generously-merciful, the pure-hearted,
the peace-makers, negotiators, mediators and reconcilers,
and those who have come through their own great ordeals and afflictions.

Blessed, they are called by Jesus, the suffering servant, who himself knew
the pain of constant displacement, exile, and persecution.

Blessed, they are called by God's loving Son who envisions and enacts
a gathering much greater than humanity can ever imagine or see,
from every tribe, people, nation and language;
who communes with us all as saints,
and gathers us dinner-table close to affirm, honor, dignify, protect, shelter,
guide, comfort and redeem suffering humanity as only God can do.

Blessed, the Church, the body of Christ is called to see and regard these people, too.

Be, Thou our vision, O Lord of our hearts.

Jesus, the tattered, living Lamb of God, calls us to *wake up* and *open our eyes*
to a kingdom beyond our seeing, that honors all people as holy,
as we gather together to serve and praise our God,

joining our voices with angels and archangels, elders and creatures,
with saints expected and unexpected who forever worship God singing:
*Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving,
honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever. Amen.*

© Marilyn T. Hedgpeth, November 5, 2017.

Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation (i.e., are written for the ear), the written accounts occasionally deviate from proper and generally accepted principles of grammar and punctuation. Most often, these deviations are not mistakes per se, but are indicative of an attempt to aid the listener in the delivery of the sermon.

© FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH 2017. FOR PERSONAL AND EDUCATIONAL USE ONLY.