

## I.

I have a problem. I hate when the tension ramps up in movies and the music starts to sound ominous. Rather than stick it out...I just leave the room. "Tell me when it's over!" I call out as I make my way to the kitchen to find a snack.

It's the same when I am reading a gripping novel. I'm invested in the characters. I want things to turn out ok. So...sometimes...JUST SOMETIMES!...I skip forward to see how things unfold. Will the hero make it out at the last minute? Will my favorite couple end up together? Will everything be, well, ok?

That drives some of my loved ones crazy. They are purists who have learned how to simply sit on the edge of their seat during nail biting scenes, no need to fast-forward to skip ahead. But what if things go sideways and the story falls apart? What if the tension or the terror, the stress or the strain, ends up not being worth it in the end? Maybe, if that is the case, it is better to put the book down altogether.

## II.

When I read the book of Revelation, I sometimes begin to wonder if I ought to stick to lighter reading. Written for a church that was undergoing persecution, unbearable suffering, and martyrdom, the book wrestles with the ways in which the world is not yet what it ought to be. It looks evil full in the face, grapples with the principalities and powers that demean human worth and life, and uncovers the deep injustices of empires and systems.

The descriptions of a world gone mad that include monsters, lots of blood, a lake of fire and an awful lot of trumpets are enough to make anyone wonder how things can turn out alright.

Our scripture for today is found between the breaking of the sixth and seventh seal. Each seal has brought more cataclysmic death, terror, and undoing. And just when we think we cannot read any further, we are given a reprieve. We are given a new sort of vision. A vision of a great multitude gathering around God's throne. The faithful people of God, gathered around God's throne, have swollen to a number too great to count. They are all robed in white and carrying palm branches, waving them in worship and praise. Angels encircle them and join in the chorus. And in the midst of stories of terror and pain, in the midst of visions of monsters and lakes of fire, all of a sudden, the sounds of singing swell around us as we find ourselves in heaven. It is almost as if we have been able to flip ahead in the story, to find a brief glimpse of how things will end.

### III.

The heaven that John describes is a place of incredible abundance. The worship that begins with singing continues, extending past the throne room into the streets that John describes, as the saints of heaven serve one another just as they serve God. Just as the crowd cannot be numbered, the worship cannot be contained.

We often think of heaven as a place of physical healing. And we take comfort in the idea that our loved ones who suffer physically, mentally, or emotionally in this life will come to experience wholeness once again in the life to come. The picture of heaven that Revelation brings us, however, is not simply one of physical healing or wellbeing. It is also a place in which wrongs are set right, unjust systems are remade, and the abundance of God is shared.

In this place, there is no more hunger. In this place, there is no more thirst. Those who once struggled and toiled under the scorching heat of the sun are instead shepherded alongside

the still waters. Restoring their souls. Every need is met. And God spends his days finding each of those who have gathered there, wiping every tear from their eyes. The end is even better than we could have imagined.

IV.

Now, Revelation does not end with this heavenly chorus. There are more trials and seals to come. And yet it is in this small reprieve that we are reminded that the hope of God breaks through, even in the midst of pain. As we consider, on this All Saints Day, what it means to live lives that have been shaped by the loss of loved ones, as we read the names of dear ones who have left this life, we are reminded, as Scripture says, that “we do not grieve as those who have no hope.” For our memories are shaped not simply by our loss, but also by our love.

It seems to me that William Faulkner was right. “The past isn’t over. It isn’t even past.” The stories we live within are not as linear as we think. And our lives fold back on themselves as the love we have shared with one another continues, even when we are no longer face to face. In Celtic Christianity there is a saying: “Heaven and earth are only three feet apart. But in the thin places, the distance is even shorter.” For early Christians in Scotland and Ireland, these thin places were where heaven seemed so close to earth that you could almost see through the veil separating them. They would mark such spots with stone circles and later with churches and cemeteries.

Maybe you have experienced a time like that. Where the things of this world and the world to come are so thinly separated that the membrane between them seems to shimmer. These are the moments when we are transported and the normal clay under our feet suddenly

becomes holy ground. It is as if we are able to flip to the end of the story for just a moment, to see, even if only briefly the way things will be, in the end.

I remember sitting next to my grandmother right before she died. And I watched as her eyes cleared from the fog of pain. And all of a sudden they became the clearest, palest blue. They were so beautiful. It seemed as if, in that moment, she was looking out past my own line of vision, to things that I could not yet glimpse for myself.

In 1 Corinthians 15 Paul writes about the great mystery of life and death and life beyond death. He says, “When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled: “Death has been swallowed up in victory.” “Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?” ... thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.”

Be steadfast...because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.—Our lives, as Christians, are shaped by hope. Our present experiences are always shaped by what we know is yet to come. In the thin places and in the holy moments we catch glimmers of this new reality that has already been put into motion in Christ’s resurrection.

V.

When I skip to the end of the book I am reading, often I find that I am able to have enough peace of mind to go back to where I was and keep moving through the story. I know that things are, ultimately, going to turn out ok. I won’t give up on the book altogether.

In some ways, that is how it is for us as Christians as well. While we know what it means to go through great ordeals....while we know what it means to face frustrations, trials, and painful loss...we also know that the hardship, pain, and suffering will not have the final word.

This allows us to keep pressing on. When we gather in the pews or around Christ's table, we are proclaiming that, in the end, love is stronger than evil and life has overcome death. Just like Revelation's vision of heaven, in the Church we remind one another that there is room for everyone around God's table and there is plenty to go around. In our worship, we act out a new sort of world, a new reality that we believe can be shared outside of our church walls as well. God's Kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.

In many ways, we do not know where our lives will take us, and we do not know all of what we will face. We cannot skip ahead to the good parts, past the chapters that are harder to read. But we have been given a glimpse of how it all will end. We have been invited to live within that good news. That hope gives us the courage to keep sharing the story and keep turning the page.

Amen.

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