

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. ¹⁰ They cried out in a loud voice, saying,

“Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne and to the Lamb!”

¹¹ And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, ¹² singing,

“Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom
and thanksgiving and honor
and power and might
be to our God forever and ever! Amen.”

¹³ Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, “Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?” ¹⁴ I said to him, “Sir, you are the one who knows.” Then he said to me, “These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

¹⁵ For this reason they are before the throne of God
and worship him day and night within his temple,
and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them.

¹⁶ They will hunger no more and thirst no more;
the sun will not strike them,
nor any scorching heat,

¹⁷ for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd,
and he will guide them to springs of the water of life,
and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

Revelation 7: 9-17

This week we continue our sermon series entitled, Embrace. Last week we were invited to embrace questions, this week we are invited to embrace difference. Over the last few years there has been a rise in conversations about diversity, equity, and inclusion, as long as I have been aware there have been committees on representation as part of the Presbyterian system. Our very own ruling elder, Ted Envela, currently serves on the Committee on Representation for Cascades Presbytery, the group of presbyterian churches that extend from Vancouver past Medford, and from Yachats to Prineville. One of their jobs is to make sure that there is a wide range of representation in the employment, committees, and leadership at the presbytery level and we at the church level are called to keep an eye out for representation seeking to do our best to make sure every voice is heard. I even served on the General Assembly Nominating Committee, the team tasked with nominating folks to serve on boards, agencies, and commissions for the denomination. We always kept an eye out for not only race and gender, but also, age, location, experience, and many other factors.

Embracing difference doesn't always mean that there's one of each category at the table. It could mean that we, as a church, an organization, or a denomination recognize our gifts, skills, and functions celebrating that there are other parts to the Body of Christ and other work to be done that we are not suited to or that there are people who connect with God in different ways and that all might not be called to be here. Even so, we can fling our doors wide, rest deeply in the knowledge and be intentional about welcoming and hospitality without judging ourselves or others about the work we do or don't do or who decides to make their spiritual home here. Embracing difference is not about believing we are all the same and that we all have the same needs or desires or ways of doing things. Embracing difference is about celebrating the panoply of gifts, voices, tribes, and ways of being that God so richly blessed our world with. I had a mentor once say, "we all agree like Amos that justice should roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream, we just disagree on the irrigation system."

One way that we are going to embrace difference is to study a bit from the book of Revelation. My guess is, for those that have found themselves in many presbyterian churches over the years that you haven't heard many sermons on the this book, and to honor the fact that a good number of our male identified members are in Suttle Lake this weekend for the Men's Retreat I am going to share some wisdom from Rev. H. Michael Brewer from his men's bible study on the book of Revelation entitled, "Strength for the Struggle."

Brewer says, "Sooner or later some psychologist is bound to diagnose a condition known as 'apocalyptophobia,' a terrible fear of reading or studying The Revelation to John. Surely there is no more intimidating book in the Bible than Revelation. Readers seem to either shy away from this strange volume altogether or get drawn into elaborate and obsessive interpretations aimed at deciphering the events of the future."

I want to point to his brief overview of the entire book, to help us understand the context of what we are reading today and I also think this is a good practice as we seek to understand difference and embrace it. We all have life experiences, we all have families of origins, and we all have levels of education, both formal and informal, but none of us have the same mix of those, which leads us to see the world, the events in it, and discern a response in different ways.

According to the book of Revelation itself, Revelation was written by someone named John who was in exile for his faith on the island of Patmos, this was probably not the same person who wrote the gospel according to John. My wife, Heidi, and I had a chance to visit Patmos a view years ago and be in the cave where this revelation was to have occurred. According to many scholars they believe that Revelation was written during a time of Christian persecution, probably during the reign of the Roman Emperor Domitian, who ruled the empire from A.D. 90-96, about 60 or so years after the death of Jesus. For Rev. Brewer, "The book as a whole is intended as a source of strength and comfort to the persecuted church throughout the world."

So now that we know who and when, let's look at what. Rev. Brewer again, "In order to understand any piece of writing, the reader must know what kind of literature is represented. The same is true of the literary types found in the Bible. Many people confuse Revelation with

prophecy, which leads to circuitous (and often silly!) efforts to make the symbols of John's visions conform to tomorrow's headlines.

In fact, Revelation is a classic example of apocalyptic literature, a form of writing that emerged in Judaism in the third century B.C. and continued to flourish in the early Christian community. Daniel in the Old Testament and Revelation in the New Testament are the best examples of this kind of writing in the Bible, but scholars know of many similar ancient books outside the Bible...

Apocalyptic literature is not really concerned with the distant future, but with the suffering and hardship of the contemporary moment. Since literature of this kind is typically written for oppressed people, the message is couched in a "code" of visions, symbolic creatures, and significant numbers in order to avoid censorship by the authorities."

Brewer concludes his overview by saying, "Revelation is not a book to fear. Here is a book of comfort and consolation. Here is a book of hope and confidence. May the Lamb unseal the treasures of this book for us. Let those who have ears listen to what the Spirit is saying!"

Our reading today comes at the end of the prophet talks about the 7 seals of the scrolls of destiny being opened and the right before the seven trumpet sounds. It paints a picture of the a great multitude that no one can count. The first half of this chapter is a list of the 144,000 folk that are sealed. I've always loved this idea of people from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. It reinforces my notion that the whole of scripture and the whole of God's work is an ever expanding ripple that encompasses all of humanity and all of creation. It starts with Adam and Eve, it moves to Abraham and Sarah, the tribes of Israel, the Gentiles, all the way to a great multitude that no one can count.

According to the New Interpreters' Bible, this great multitude is reminiscent of the crowd that greeted Jesus for his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, the event we celebrate on Palm Sunday as we begin Holy Week. The difference in this crowd and the crowd in Jerusalem is they do not turn away they do not turn away from Jesus. I also want to lift up this image that we find in the verse 14. It says, "These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb." This great ordeal seemingly for the author John, is those that have witnessed against the Babylon, they have resisted the pressure to conform to the allure of power, of violence, of a winner take all attitude, of scarcity. Those who took an active role in washing their robes in the blood of the Lamb. An image that doesn't make sense, how could washing in blood make things clean, redeemed.

I want to take a moment here to raise an issue that has plagued the interpretation of scripture. The use of the images of light and dark have been used in problematic ways over the years. In many ways, white or light has been seen as good and black or dark as bad. This has led to interpretations of the scripture that if you were white or lighter skinned you were better than those who were black and brown or with darker skin. This is not a faithful interpretation. I also want to say that I'm not particularly interested in wearing a robe, especially the same color as

everyone else. When I look at the palette of colors, sounds, vibrations, dances, and ways of dress used to celebrate I think it would be so sad if our world was flattened to only white. It makes me think of the vast colors that our trees are showing us during the fall. It shows up in all the ways that our creation celebrates and give thanks as the let go of what was and embrace what is to come.

As I dug into this passage more I realized that the service that the white was not about our clothes or our job it was a representation of those who witnessed against the powers and principalities that sought to make sure there was an in and an out, an us and a them, winners and losers. This great multitude are those that refused to compromise, inside or outside the church, who refused to believe that some were loved and others weren't even in the midst of ridicule, in derision, or even in death. The New Interpreters' Bible reminds us that "the great multitude includes many who never "named the name" of Jesus but who lived lives that continued in the way of Jesus. We are reminded that to love in the way of Jesus is to be engaged in an exercise of power that uses its influence to bring about justice, that opens doors for those who have been locked out, it centers the hungry and the thirsty.

As a full inclusion community we welcome differing opinions, differing ideas, differing experiences, differing irrigation systems. We as part of the body of Christ cannot be all things to all people and cannot respond to every need but we can experience and embody the body of Christ is a way that celebrates who we are, where we've come from, and where the Spirit is leading us and in the end I believe that we will all be joined in the great multitude that no one can count. Joined with all of you, ordinary people embodying and experiencing God's extraordinary love.

May it be so.

Amen.