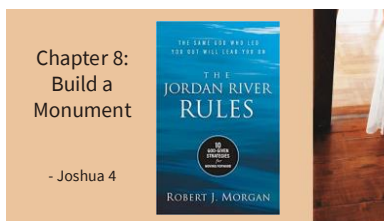


Revelation 7:9-17

⁹After 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. ¹⁰They cried out in a loud voice, saying, “Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!” ¹¹And 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, ¹²singing, “Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.”

¹³Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, “Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?” ¹⁴I said to him, “Sir, you are the one that 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. ¹⁵For 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. ¹⁶They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; ¹⁷for 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.”



This week's chapter in our Jordan River Rules book is called “Build a Monument.” The chapter is based on Joshua 4. Please turn with me to Joshua 4 as we begin. To connect

from last week's Deuteronomy passage, after mourning Moses, the Israelites crossed through the Jordan on dry land, as God once again parted the waters.

As the priests carrying the ark of the Lord stepped into the river, which was at flood stage, the water began to pile up far upstream. The priests and the ark stood their ground in the middle of the river as thousands upon thousands of Israelites passed by. As the story continues in chapter 4, Joshua instructs twelve strong men, one from each tribe, to go back to where the priests were standing. Once there, they were each to pick up a large stone to carry to where they were to camp that night. Joshua then took the twelve stones and set up a memorial for future generations.

In verses 6-7 we read, *“When your children ask in time to come, ‘What do these stones mean to you?’ then you shall tell them that the waters of the Jordan were cut off in front of the ark of the covenant of the Lord.”*



These words mirror the words spoken each year by the youngest person at the Passover table, opening the door for one of the elders to tell the story of God’s faithfulness. For the Israelites, these twelve stones would forever be a memorial of the time when God parted the waters so that they could pass through. As we celebrate All Saints’ Day today and as we delve into our passage from Revelation, this passage from Joshua is a great reminder of the importance of passing on our faith. Each of us can name people who have stood as stones of faith, setting for us an example to follow. As we remember these saints, we say thanks be to God for the saints that have poured into our lives and into our faith. Let us pray...



Turn with me to Revelation 7 as we continue in this time together. As we turn to the book of Revelation, we first acknowledge that this is not an easy book to digest or to work one’s way through.

In fact, many often avoid this book, preferring the gospels or Acts or Paul's letters. As we come to the end of next year, we will invest several Sundays in the book of Revelation as we complete our Bible Year reading project.

At the time of its writing, Revelation was intended to bring comfort to the faithful Christians on this side of God's "big reveal," on this side of the curtain. John penned these words to bring hope to those whose world felt like it was falling apart. Revelation was not meant to be a map to understand the end of this world as we know it, although one can use it that way. It was meant as a promise to those living in John's time who felt as if the end were there right now.

In today's passage, beginning in verse 9, John describes a glorious picture in heaven. A countless sea of faithful people are dressed in white, singing praises to God. They have been



through the trials and tribulations of this world and they are now with the risen Christ in glory. These faithful saints were bruised and beaten by life. They spent their days in fear and many were persecuted for their faith. Some were even martyred. And in this scene set in heaven, they sing at the top of their lungs, rejoicing and offering praise and thanksgiving to the Lord. This is such a beautiful image to behold.

Take a look at the crowd depicted in this artwork. It reflects the diversity that will be found in heaven. As John put it, this heavenly assembly will be "*from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages.*" Today is also a great day for recognizing the multicolored, multiethnic, multinational nature of the church of Jesus Christ.

There is diversity in our local congregation, but the diversity grows larger when we remember that there are brothers and sisters all around the world who are part of the body that gives us our identity and our hope. On this All-Saints' Day, we celebrate the church that we will one day see on the other side of the curtain, and we acknowledge our desire to see the glory of a more diverse worldwide church, in the here and now.

While this is not yet a fully realized ideal for the church worldwide, this vision of heaven enables us to hold out hope for the what the church could and should be some day here on earth. Revelation paints a picture of the church made up of every nation, of every tribe, and of all kinds of peoples. It is a vision for a community that we pray one day does become the reality. To that end, we must ask ourselves, both as an individual and as a community of faith, what are we doing to make this beautiful diversity more of a reality at Grace United Methodist Church?

Returning to our passage, this multitude of saints declares that *“salvation belongs to our God...and to the lamb who is seated on the throne.”* This is what they have experienced. Their faith and trust in the Lord have led them to their place in the multitude. They are then joined by the angels and the elders and the four living creatures as together they all sing, *“Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.”* Truth be told, I just do not know how this scene could get any better. This is what awaits those of us who have faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior, who trust in him as the king of kings and lord of lords, who know Christ as our salvation.

Continuing on in Revelation 7, in verse 13, one of the elders asks John who these people are clothed in white robes. John acknowledges that the elder knows, prompting the elder to reveal who they are. The elder identifies them, saying, *“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.”* To those who would read these words, just after they were written, those who were experiencing the persecution of the Roman empire, these words would speak of a future with hope.

“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.”

- Revelation 7:14

Their robes, which were tarnished and stained with the trials and struggles and persecution of their earthly life, they were made white as snow in glory, washed in the blood of Jesus Christ. Their suffering, the stains of brokenness and fear and worry from their lives in this world, they are washed away as they enter into eternity. They are washed clean not by their own doing but by the faithfulness of Jesus Christ. Jesus’ suffering has redeemed their suffering. As we read on, the reality of heaven is further explained. The elder shares that the one on the throne, Jesus, will shelter them and shepherd them so that there will be no hunger or thirst. Furthermore, the sun will not strike or scorch them. This refers to the hardships endured under the Roman emperor, represented by the sun in John’s book of Revelation. In heaven, this affliction will be no more.

Our passage closes with these two wonderful promises. First, Jesus *“will guide them to springs of the water of life.”* Life abundant and glorious and beautiful awaits the faithful on the other side of the curtain. Second, *“God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”* The pain and trials of this world will be no more.



It is no wonder that many approach death with a hope and an excitement as their earthly life draws to a close. They know these words of promise and they look forward to being in Jesus' presence. We too can see death and the life that follows with hope as we hold onto the promises of eternity.

While we know these promises to be true and while we know that heaven will be beyond our greatest imagination, there is also the reality that in our culture we do not like talking about death. Being around death makes most of us at least uncomfortable. For example, when a person that we know loses someone they love, we do not really know what to say. So, we often say nothing out of our fear of saying something wrong. Or, when we are the one who has lost someone that we love, we do not know how to ask others for the help that we need.

Perhaps we can learn a little bit from the early Christians. This was John's audience for Revelation. We can learn from them because the early church did not shy away from talking about death. In the early church, death was all around them. Persecution and martyrdom were not uncommon. Revelation was a reminder for the early Christians of this hard reality. During this reality, though, when a faithful member of the church died, the living would gather to remember their faith. Whether in the place that the faithful person had died or in the catacombs where they were buried, the church would gather.

There, together in community, they would celebrate the life well-lived. And in this celebration, they would remember that their faith did not come out of nowhere. They would remember that their faith was inherited. They would remember that their faith was passed on to them by someone who had come before.

They would recall how the deceased person had passed on their faith. They would remember others who had passed on their faith too. They would share stories of faithful living and of the faithful saints. In doing so, they were thankful for those who had poured into them, and they were encouraged to be people who passed their faith on to others.

If we were better at remembering those who came before us in the faith, those who poured into our faith, then maybe we would not have such a hard time with death. In remembering and celebrating we also rejoice in the new reality for those who have gone on to be with the Lord. This was part of the story of Revelation. Those whose robes were washed in the blood of Jesus had lived faithful lives. It is good and right to remember and to celebrate them, both then and now.

With that in mind, today we proclaim that we are who we are because of those who have gone before. While this is true, we also give thanks for the saints who are still with us. Today is also a celebration of the life and ministry of the church. My friends, many of the saints remain with us. As I mentally scrolled through the people who call Grace their church home, there were many times that I paused at and mentally said, “saint.” Yes, the saints also include the living.

Each of us has been touched by the saints that have crossed our paths, that have raised us or taught us, that have given of themselves on our behalf. These are saints who have shaped and formed us into the people that we are. These are saints who have loved us and failed us and everything in between. We are also being touched, shaped, formed, and poured into by the current saints of the church.

All of these saints call us to a life of hope, to a life that believes that pain and death do not have the last word, to a life of witnessing to our faith. These gifts from the saints allow us to worship and to live faithfully even in the toughest of times. These blessings allow us to see what the world cannot see – a truth that is clearly revealed today in our Revelation passage.

Together with this remembering of the saints, this truth reminds us that we are a family, that we are all God's children, and that one day we will all sit together at the great feast, robed together in white – a white not made by bleach but by the blood of Jesus Christ. And there, we will join together with the angels, the elders, and those who have gone before to offer our praise and thanksgiving to the Lord our God. And there we will all gather together, saying, alleluia and amen.

GPS – Grow, Pray, Study

- 1) *Grow*. What is currently your greatest tribulation or persecution? How might God work through this to build up your faith?
- 2) *Pray*. As you think of the saints in your life, who comes to mind? What did they pour into or teach you? Offer a prayer of thanksgiving to God.
- 3) *Study*. Read 1st Thessalonians 4:9-12. What advice is Paul offering about living a “saintly” life? What areas could you improve upon?