

“When the End Is Our Beginning”

Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler

Presbyterian Church in Leonia

Virtual Worship

November 1, 2020

---

Revelation 7:9-17

Matthew 5:1-12

At the end of every day last week, as we tucked our daughter into bed, we asked her, as we always do, to share one thing that made her happy that day. We asked her to share one thing that made her sad that day. And we asked her to share where she felt God that day. These questions are a simplified version of the Ignatian spiritual practice of asking the Examen questions. Just about every day last week, the thing our daughter said made her sad was that it wasn't Halloween yet.

Well, yesterday Halloween finally came, and with it a day full of sunshine after a week of rain. We took part in a gathering of community that feels quite rare these days, as the children of Leonia and beyond paraded up Broad Avenue, in an array of costumes, to receive candy from a social distance from neighbors, businesses, and organizations such as our church-- which was there with its Holey Ghost Candy Chute that Trish Thams built. The losses from this pandemic and the stresses of politics set aside, you couldn't have asked for a better day.

At the end of the day as we tucked Kai in last night, she shared the ways she felt happy from the day, and they were numerous. What made her sad, she said, was that Halloween was over.

Just like that (snap). All she had been waiting for-- and you should know that she started planning for Halloween in March, when we first were stuck home from the pandemic-- like that (snap) it was over.

When we lose someone we love, especially if their death comes too soon, it can feel like that: (snap), gone, before you feel like you can fully live into every moment, embody all its joy, all their love, share all your gratitude, say all the things you've longed to say, share all the meals you hoped to enjoy together, smile from all the laughter, be wrapped in all the hugs.

But whether it is as minor as a sugar crash at bedtime after a much-anticipated Halloween has ended, or as devastating as the grief that strikes the soul when a loved one dies, the longing we feel at endings can point the way to living better; they can even point us towards God.

Jesus promised us, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.” He said a few other ridiculous things too, like “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” and “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.” In Greek, the word *blessed* translates as *happy*. The paradox of these passages is that the very things that tend to make us sad, Jesus predicts, God will use to make us happy, or blessed. These sayings of Jesus

aren't ridiculous because they are funny; they are ridiculous because that is not often how we see the world work. It means that God plans to do exciting things with and through those who do not have power or status; God's attention is on the losers more than on the winners; and God gives special care for those who grieve.

I used to tread warily on these words, because I questioned a God who would glorify vulnerability and suffering. I have heard some bad theology that encourages us to take our sufferings gladly, because our rewards will be greater in heaven.

But these words speak honestly to something I have learned is true in life: God's people don't always get the best candy, have the easiest lives, or enjoy the blessings of peace. Suffering is woven into the fabric of human existence. Jesus knew that, from how he lived, and how he died. The Beatitudes teach us to take those vulnerabilities that life gives us, and find our power and hope in them.

Brené Brown tells us, "Embracing our vulnerabilities is risky but not nearly as dangerous as giving up on love and belonging and joy."

Revelation continues the hopeful promise of the Beatitudes: "They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb... will be their shepherd, and will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

The book of Revelation, as our 3rd graders who received their new bibles last weekend learned, is the last book of the Christian bible. It's actual name is The Apocalypse of John; apocalypse in Greek means *uncovering* or *unveiling*. However, for one who doesn't know much about symbols and struggle in early Christianity, the book of Revelation probably confuses more than it reveals, which is why it doesn't show up so much in our lectionary readings.

The promise we see in this chapter of Revelation brings a multitude: every nation, every race, every tribe, every tongue, before the throne of the Lamb. One of the elders asks, "Who *are* these people arrayed in white robes, and where did they come from?" And the response comes, "These are the ones who made it out of the great ordeal."

2020, for most of us, has been *The Great Ordeal*. Everything from our daily routines, to our larger hopes and fears, have been upended. Emblematic of how this year has felt in our lives, last week, a man waiting at a bus stop in The Bronx got swallowed into an underground cavern when the sidewalk collapsed beneath him. He fell over 15 feet, and there were so many rats surrounding him that he refrained from screaming for fear that rats would crawl into his mouth.

As for John, the author of Revelation, *The Great Ordeal* which was swallowing him and other Christians up was the tyranny of the Roman Emperor Domitian, who, in about 90 CE, began demanding that all his subjects call him "Lord and God." Those whose religion kept them from doing so were threatened with imprisonment, exile, or even execution.

The shadows of empire still loom over us today, albeit in different ways; the coming week's election will reveal just how tightly we are wrapped in its grasp. Hopefully, we will look back on 2021 as the year we left "*The Great Ordeal*" behind us, in terms of the heartbreaking divisions and injustices in this country, the pandemic, rats, and so forth.

But before we leave the shadows cast by these times, consider asking the shadows to first bless us. What has our vulnerability taught us? What have our longings made us stretch to reach? How have our tears healed us? Sure, some have admitted to me, you've reached for the bottle to soothe anxious nerves, more than you know is healthy. But perhaps you have also reached to form community and even love in new ways. Brené Brown tells us, "The dark does not destroy the light; it defines it. It's our fear of the dark that casts our joy into the shadows."

Having gone through these shadows helps to make us the saints of the church. All Saints' Day began as a day to recognize martyred saints. In the Catholic church, each Saint has a special Saint day. But then there have been so many saints, that Catholics had to make a day that could recognize them all at once.

In the Reformed tradition to which we belong, however, there is the sense that **all** Christians are saints of the church. Our sainthood is not something we have earned; it is a grace that comes along with our salvation. Especially for those of us who have walked in the darker valleys of life, you have come to see what salvation looks like.

We speak of the Communion of Saints in Protestant Christianity. That refers to a liturgical and sacramental continuity with all Christians, of every time and place. When we gather at the Communion Table today, we are already making the spiritual leap that our prayers and God's blessings will bring us from your living rooms and kitchens, to Christ's table. But did you know that the eternal love of God will also bring Jack to the table? And Rae? Margaret, and my father-in-law, and **all** who died this year and beyond?

What these dearly departed can see clearly now, at the end, is the perspective from God's viewpoint, which Jesus tried to convey to us in the Beatitudes and the parables.

But we don't have to die to see beyond The Great Ordeal. The resurrection hope our faith teaches us is that we can approach our losses, our vulnerability, our endings, as a new beginning. Nelson Mandela once said, "Do not judge me by my success, judge me by how many times I fell down and got back up again." The God who constantly calls us into life will send the Spirit of blessing upon you. Amen.

