



'Resurrection Impact: Sing with Angels'

Fourth Sunday of Easter
8:30 & 10:45 am, April 17, 2016
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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church
Camp Hill, Pennsylvania

[Psalm 23](#); [Revelation 7:9-17](#); [John 10:22-30](#)

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

What a vision John experiences! A countless number of people representing every land and language, every race and tribe—and all of them in one great unity waving palm branches as they worship the crucified and risen Jesus. Along with them, angels and other heavenly creatures sing praises unceasingly to God. Then, a description and promise—Jesus, the Lamb of God slain for them, will be their shepherd, and all manner of things will be well.

No wonder this passage from the book of Revelation is also read on the festival of All Saints. On that particular festival Sunday in early November when we remember those who have died in the previous year, we look to John's vision of heaven, of what life with God is meant to be and will be, and we find great comfort and hope.

But here is this same passage, now tucked into the middle of the Easter season. And why? Well, maybe it offers something new to us. Not just a description about what heaven looks like or where our loved ones go when they die, but rather, what the Church looks like. What God's final intention is for his people **as a people**. John gives us a preview of the way things are to be. Scholars call this a vision of the church triumphant. It is a vision of the people of God in victory.

But it is only a preview, for John, the writer of Revelation, and all the rest of us down to this day live in what seems to be a completely different church—this church on earth. Scholars call this the church militant, the church in battle. It, too, is described in Revelation.

When you read the book of Revelation, it's important to keep in mind that John is not predicting current and future earthly events for you and me in 2016 and beyond. In other words, it was never John's intention that we should take each particular symbol, creature, number or story in Revelation and apply it to a particular nation or leader, religious group or event in our day and time. Rather, his writings refer to **his** day and time—the first century of Christianity. It was a dangerous time. Both Jews and Christians were minority religions, little people facing the behemoth that was the all-consuming Roman empire. Walking this path of faith with God meant refusing to participate in the ways of the empire. It meant rejecting the emperor as a god. It meant rejecting the cultural norms that existed that only perpetuated social division and kept people in line: The rich ... the poor. The revered ... and the reviled. The free master ... and his enslaved servant. When Christians and other religious minorities refused to live by this norms, rejected the power of

the empire, and worshiped their God and not the emperor, they faced at the very least social and economic marginalization, and at the most, outright persecution.

So when John describes in Revelation the church militant, the embattled church on earth, those who heard or read his words totally understood. Because they were living it.

The early church not only experienced threats from without, but also threats from within. Teachings contrary to what had been passed down from Jesus, theological arguments, attempts by various parties to gain control, and so on divided Christians from one another. Then there were churches John termed "lukewarm" in their sharing the story of Jesus—they exhibited a kind of passivity, a spectator approach to the Christian life (which was, granted, a less dangerous way to live in the Roman empire, but also not very authentic in modeling the way of Jesus).

Okay, so while John is not intending us to link up his images with our current situations, it is clear that you and I do participate in an embattled church. We have much less influence upon culture and society than we did several hundred years ago, or even 50 years ago. (Cultural commentators call this period we are living in as a time of "post-Christendom"). Smaller congregations struggle to keep their doors open, wondering how to pay the heating bill for the sanctuary in wintertime as well as the health insurance premium of their pastor when average attendance is dwindling, and limited to 30 or so senior citizens on fixed incomes. Larger congregations spend an inordinate amount of energy positioning themselves in the marketplace because, frankly, church membership is simply one activity among many for a society bursting at the seams with activities from which to choose. Being part of a faith community may or may not be chosen and then added to an already busy schedule. If chosen, it may receive a smaller slice of the pie of a member's time, energy, and resources.

And while most of us in this nation have not experienced religious persecution, it exists around our world, and Christians (and other minority religions) have suffered, have been martyred for their faith, or live in fear and cannot freely worship. So, yes, we are still the church militant.

Embattled not only from without but also from within. In some corners, the earthly church has turned a blind eye to pedophilia. In some corners, the earthly church elitism, racism, misogyny, homophobia, xenophobia. The church, sadly, often perpetuates the same judgments, the same divisions that have broken down our society and fragment us as the people of this earth. And we the church have been lukewarm—unable or unwilling to live out the serving, compassionate, unconditional love of God modeled for us in Jesus Christ. Because, it's true, there is some danger to living like him. It is not an easy path because on it, we might just be changed, and we don't always want to be changed. For to walk the path of Jesus is to embrace things not of the empire, but a way of being that involves striving for peace and reconciliation, that seeks justice and equity, that counters hatred with love. In that way of being, there's a good chance we'll be misunderstood or worse, mocked and rejected. So we the church would rather just kind of sit and do nothing and stay exactly the same. Is it any wonder some say the church is "in decline"?

At the end of chapter 6 in Revelation, when it looks as if all creation has been shaken to its very core, and destruction is the end of all things, the people ask a poignant

question in their desperation: “Who is able to stand?” Were we to end reading Revelation there, we would answer, “No one ... no one is able to stand.” But instead, John's vision continues, and in chapter 7, in the passage we read today comes the answer to that question. His vision declares that with God's help we—all people—are able to stand. John Holbert of the Perkins School of Theology puts it this way: “Revelation is in fact about one thing: God wins and the powers of evil lose. And at the end of all things, God will make ‘all things new,’ not ‘all new things.’” (“No, It's Not ‘Revelations,’ and It is Not about That!” by John C. Holbert, Patheos, October 24, 2014)

All things new, not all new things. John's vision holds for us the promise of a creation restored to the way God always intended it to be. The church militant will become the church triumphant—the same, yet different, and bigger, and unified, and focused, and faithful. Neighbors all, the church will be a community of such diversity gathered around the throne its oneness will surprise us. Divisions ended, judgments overcome, and life together in praise of this Jesus—the One who made it all possible by relinquishing his power in the face of powers. Who served when he could have demanded to be served. Who loved even when the objects of his love were so unlovable.

John's words were intended to give encouragement and hope to the church 2000 years ago, enabling it to go forward in faith. The same holds true for us in these days. The church militant in 2016 journeys forward in that same encouragement and hope, following the path on which Jesus is leading us. Can we picture ourselves living in this vision? Maybe it seems too unbelievable some days. Yet John the Revelator declares we will sing with the angels. **AMEN.**

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