

Lectionary A November 2, 2014 All Saints Sunday
Grace and Peace Lutheran Church, Evansville, IN
Roberta Meyer

Revelation 7:9-17
Psalm 34:1-10, 22
1 John 3:1-3
Matthew 5:1-12

Thin Places and Surprises

When I was a little girl, there was this apple tree in our backyard. I don't know how big it really was, but to me it seemed as mighty as one of those giant Red Woods I saw several years ago on the coast line of Northern California. Yes, to me, when I climbed that tree, it was like being on top of the world. Why I could almost touch the clouds. I could almost see Heaven.

Rev. Dr. Nora Tubbs, in a commentary she wrote on this week's texts, says places like my apple tree are called "thin places." She said, "*They are called "thin" because it is believed that in these places the distance between heaven and earth shrinks, and the veil between the two worlds is so "thin" you can actually perceive something of heaven itself.*"¹ In my apple tree there was no time or space. I was up there close to God, dreaming and hoping and just plain being a little girl in a place that was special and safe. Now that I'm an adult, I realize that apple tree was a thin place for me where I could experience glimpses of heaven.

Today, as we are celebrating All Saint's Sunday, we, too, find ourselves in a "thin place." As we get a glimpse of heaven from our text from Revelation, we are invited to look beyond the tree limbs at what's up there. Now, before we start looking too hard, I want to warn you. Hold on. There may be some surprises in heaven that you aren't prepared for. When we look through this peek hole the author St. John gives us, we are going to see stuff in heaven that we never expected.

Let's read what it says from the Message Bible, "*I looked again. I saw a huge crowd, too huge to count. Everyone was there—all nations and tribes, all races and languages.*"² I'm pretty sure in that crowd there will be people that I would never dream could be in heaven. I know when I was young I was told by my Aunt who went to some kind of legalistic church that I would not go to heaven because I had pierced ears. And then there was the fact that I wore shorts and make-up. Later, an uncle who was very saddened by my divorce told me in a very loving way that if I

¹ http://day1.org/1117-glimpsing_heaven_in_thin_places

² Message Bible

remarried I could not go to heaven. They weren't trying to be mean, they were just trying to make sense of things that don't make sense to us humans.

That's what it is like when we try to figure out who God lets into heaven. Read this text, there are people from all nations, all tribes, all races, all languages. But God can't mean those whose ways are so foreign to us, we see them as enemies?

Let's face it, we all have our blind spots, our prejudices. And, so, I think we're all going to be surprised by who is sitting at that eternal banquet table with us in heaven. We might as well get prepared to see people there we considered unforgivable, unredeemable. People against whom we have long held grudges or prejudices. People from nations we branded with the label "enemy" or people we failed to even see in this life because of their poverty, disease, or life style.

Count on it. They will all be there, *from all nations and tribes, all races and languages.*"³ No matter how inclusive we think we are here at Grace and Peace, and we do pride ourselves on welcoming all God's people here, we need to be ready to be shocked because heaven--according to John's vision in Revelation--will be far more inclusive than we could ever fathom in our farthest dreams.

Ok, so who we see in heaven will be a surprise. Ready for another surprise? What about what people DO in heaven? Isn't it typical to vision a lot of harp playing, and angels lounging around on clouds, a sort of lackadaisical perpetual vacation?

But what does our Revelation Text say about what goes on in heaven? *All who were standing around the Throne—Angels, Elders, Animals—fell on their faces before the Throne and worshiped God, singing:*

Oh, Yes!

The blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving,

The honor and power and strength,

To our God forever and ever and ever!

*Oh, Yes!"*⁴

If you think Ben gets us rocking, just wait until you see heaven. There will be some active worshipping happening. Everyone worshipping and singing, angels and people and even animals will be praising God, one perpetual Halleluiah Chorus with all the bells and whistles!

But there is something else, besides the singing and praising there will be some work. Everyone serving God and others--doing the things that gave them the greatest joy, the greatest meaning, in their life here on earth.

³ NRSV

⁴ Message Bible

Let's look at the Greek word used in this text for worship. It is "LATREUO", which also means to work or to serve.⁵ This worship will be working together like we do on "God's Work Our Hands" Sunday. And it won't stay in the church's sanctuary. This Worship/Work is the kind that extends into the streets, as the saints of heaven serve one another as God in Christ has served them. Think of the meals cooked and served, the visiting happening, all the ways we work together. Do you think there will be a Fall Festival in heaven?

Besides WHO is in heaven and what they DO in heaven, there is another surprise. We will be surprised at the scope of HEALING in heaven. Most of us already think of heaven as a place of personal healing. And it is a comfort it is to know that our loved ones, many who suffered a whole lot physically, mentally and emotionally here on earth, will be healed, completely whole in the life to come.

But when John shows us a glimpse into heaven, we see that the healing that will go on there is far broader than that of our own personal lives and the lives of our loved ones.

John points out those in heaven whose robes are washed in the blood of the Lamb. Who are these people? *"These are those who come from the great tribulation...no more hunger, no more thirst, no more scorching heat. The Lamb on the Throne will shepherd them, will lead them to spring waters of Life. And God will wipe every last tear from their eyes."*⁶

Heaven is a place where all the injustices of this world will finally be made right, where the lowly will be lifted up, and where God's vision of a community of justice and peace and equality reigns.

So up there in your apple tree, do you see Jesus getting things ready for the big party? But wait a minute. There are times when I'm not sure I am invited. I struggle a lot. There's a lot I'm not understanding.

If you are like me, and have thoughts like this, there's something we need to remember. Martin Luther said "struggling" was one of the signs of a faithful church. He figured that where there is faith there is also always struggle. That means doubt, feeling overwhelmed, wondering if God is out there – these aren't signs of failure or lack of faith, but are actually proof of our profound faith as we wrestle with these deep questions and show that we take God seriously.⁷ As we write our prayers this morning and bring them to the altar, let's remember God's promises

⁵ <http://www.kevingcook.com/worship/greek-words-for-worship/>

⁶ NRSV

⁷ David Lose

in 1 John, that “we’re called children of God!”⁸ And in Revelation that “God will wipe every last tear from [our] eyes.”⁹ These promises are for us, especially when we doubt.

So who are blessed saints this All Saints Sunday morning? Let’s listen to the answer to that question from our Gospel text as stated in the Message Bible:

***You’re** blessed when you’re at the end of your rope. ..*

*“**You’re** blessed when you feel you’ve lost what is most dear to you...*

*“**You’re** blessed when you’re content with just who you are—no more, no less...*

*“**You’re** blessed when you’ve worked up a good appetite for God. He’s food and drink in the best meal you’ll ever eat.*

*“**You’re** blessed when you care...*

*“**You’re** blessed when you get your inside world—your mind and heart—put right. Then you can see God in the outside world.*

*“**You’re** blessed when you can show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight...*

*“**You’re** blessed when your commitment to God provokes persecution... You can be glad when that happens—give a cheer, even!—for... all heaven applauds [!]”¹⁰*

So what do you say my fellow saints? That’s quite a glimpse of heaven from up high in an apple tree. Amen

⁸ NRSV

⁹ Message Bible

¹⁰ Message Bible