Nu’uanu Congregational Church

November 1, 2020

ALL SAINTS SUNDAY

*“Sacrifice of Praise”* Revelation 7:9-17

In recent years, John of Patmos’ Book of Revelation has developed a rather sensational —even lurid—reputation in popular culture, and no wonder with all of the gaudy images it conjures—the beasts with seven heads, the woman riding on the beast, and the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, and so on and so forth.

Special focus has also been on John’s description of the signs to look for the rise of the antichrist. This particular image has especially grabbed the imagination of many people. Sadly, the interest it inspires tends to be fearful, even morbid.

Of course, the Book of Revelation *is* very visceral, very visual way. However, it is not supposed to be a scary book of doom and gloom. Despite all of the graphic-novel style of language, Revelation is supposed to be John of Patmos’ words of *reassurance* for his first-century fellow Christians. John received Revelation as a vision of God’s power. It was a vision meant to inspire hope, and John recorded and passed it on so that other believers would take heart and not be afraid. It was a gift to John and humankind.

John lived in a time like many others in human history. It was a time of turmoil and unrest. Nero was the emperor, and like other Caesars, he persecuted the Christians, and all who would not call him god. It was a time of fear and despair for many.

All of the fantastic imagery in John’s vision was meant to convey that despite everything that was happening around them, God was still in control. God was in control and that meant that, ultimately, God was going to triumph.

Even in a world that seemed hopelessly evil and chaotic, John wanted people to know that God’s was the real strength in this struggle; goodness and love were the real signs of power. So, instead of the fantastic images of fire and violence, the book’s true nature is captured by remembering that John did not title his vision “The Unveiling of the Antichrist,” but rather “The Revelation of Jesus Christ.” And in the revelation of Christ, lo and behold, the human creature is also gathered close to celebrate with Christ. All the saints of the church who believed in the love that was offered to them, and who cherished the cost that made it possible—they are gathered close.

This is a book that describes the true power of God’s love as it is portrayed in Christ.

John uses many signs and symbols to describe the vision he had received, and his symbols for Christ are especially arresting. In the passage we just heard, Jesus is symbolically represented by the Lamb. We are also told that the multitude who have gathered around the throne of God are dressed in garments made snow-white by washing them in the blood of the Lamb.

For the first people who received John’s story, such a declaration would have been confusing—if they took it literally. However, I am going to go out on a limb and suggest that our ancient brothers and sisters in the faith were just as intelligent and capable as we are of understanding John’s use of a paradox and metaphor to convey a deeper truth. So, they understood the visual Blood of the Lamb was something other than materially true.

Rather, it was a deeply moving way of talking about the need to clothe oneself in the whole life of the Lamb whose blood has transforms our whole selves, our whole being, and clothes us in a garment that shines for all to see—a garment and a life that bears witness to the reality of God’s love, and what love can do in the life of the faithful.

And the Lamb, which is so often portrayed or thought of as something meek and mild—this Lamb is actually a way of talking about Jesus and how his whole life was dedicated to being the incarnation of God’s love—love made flesh that lived and dwelled among us; love that recognized the cost of love and was ready to offer it.

For God’s love to take the form of a lamb, is to offer this love in a way that portrays gentleness. At the same time, it also speaks to us about a God who will offer all of God’s-self to us, and asks us to make the same commitment to God.

The word we usually use for this kind of human connection is sacrifice. This means that the Lamb of God should also bring to mind the old practice in many cultures of blood-sacrifice.

While I do not mind beginning with such a figure of speech, I wonder if there is a way for us to speak about sacrifice without resorting to such language. I am not squeamish about blood—not after living among ranchers in Montana for four years; they helped me overcome that right away. It’s just that the image of blood-sacrifice brings us back to a symbol that is inherently violent—even if we do receive it as a metaphor. And I believe that Christ’s life, his death, and his resurrection portray to us God’s desire to move us toward a life together that does not have to include the pain or destruction anyone, or even of any*thing*.

Certainly, John’s use of the image of the Lamb (even in the short passage we heard) made liberal use of paradox and reversal. Thus, the Lamb becomes the shepherd for the multitudes of others “and he will guide them to springs of the water of life” [v. 17]—the Lamb becomes the shepherd.

As one commentator has written: *“The Lamb as shepherd king differs from the norm of human kings in other ways as well. The Lamb* shares power and victory *with those he leads. That is why the “great multitude” is assembled before the Lamb “robed in white.”* The Lamb has also put “palm branches in their hands” (v. 9). Both the white robes and the palms are symbols of power and victory. This is what the Lamb offers.”

The Lamb draws all people to itself in order to bless them with the strength and hope to live in any and every age, and the courage to go on believing and hoping, even in times of challenge and desperation.

It does this by giving of itself to all human creatures. It loves deeply and completely—it puts aside the world’s exclusively self-referential perspective for a way of living that recognizes the need to consider and cherish what will build community and make for the common good.

The Lamb leads us to the waters that we may be baptized—that we may sacrifice our old life in order to be raised-up to new life and life everlasting. To sacrifice, then, does not invite destruction. Rather, it is the epitome of hope, and an invitation to step forward into the future.

I chose to preach on this passage today because of where we are in the church year—it is All Saints Day. We usually think about this day as a day of remembrance—and so it is. But it is more than remembering the names of those who have died during the year and in other years. It is more than allowing ourselves to dwell on our feelings of loss—although we can do that, too, knowing that there are others who hold the same bittersweet thoughts of love and loss. We are not alone.

But this is a day, really, for recognizing and giving thanks for the lives that were lived, and the love we know lived in those lives. It is a day for giving thanks for the way in which love built this church. It is a day for remembering and giving thanks for the sacrifices of time, talent, and treasure these saints made to build their church, and that they have handed it to us to carry on the legacy.

It is a day for remembering and celebrating that we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses—all of the saints of the church. They have shown us what they could. Although they are now hidden in God’s loving embrace, their stories and their spirits are still with us. So, let us remember and give thanks, and let us rejoice and thank God.

Amen.