

**Davidson College Presbyterian Church**  
**Davidson, North Carolina**  
**Lib McGregor Simmons**  
**“Singing Hymns of Hope”**  
**Revelation 7-8:5**  
**9th Sunday after Pentecost**  
**July 17, 2016**

We continue our summer series on Revelation. If you were here last Sunday or read or listened to last Sunday’s sermon online, then you will remember that we ended our reading just as the sixth seal on the scroll in Pastor John’s vision was opened and when that wax seal was broken, it was as if all hell had broken loose on earth. There was a violent earthquake, everybody scrambled for cover, screaming at the tops of their lungs as they ran, “Who is able to stand?”

Pastor John of Patmos continues with this description of his vision.

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What is a person to do when an earthquake is rocking and the mountains are rolling? What is the church to do when life feels like the sky is turning black and the devil’s on your back? What are people of faith to do when gunfire rings out and trucks plow through holiday celebrations and military coups are raging and mission co-workers are being evacuated and it seems as if all hell has broken out on earth? What is anyone to do when cancer rings your doorbell or divorce slithers under your back door or depression takes up residence, claiming squatter’s rights in the guest bedroom?

On most Sundays when we read Revelation, Pastor John of Patmos is the captain of the cheerleader squad. He wields a big megaphone exhorting Christ followers not to lose hope when bad things are happening, but to STAND UP and STAND OUT even in the face of the Roman Empire that would not give the slightest momentary passing thought to squashing them like pesky gnats that had been so bold as to light on the Emperor’s picnic table.

On most Sundays, Revelation is a call to action for Christ followers to come screaming out of the Christian closet, as Brian Blount puts it, and to keep on keeping on making a stand for justice on every street corner.

But you know, sometimes, when people’s socks have been scared clear off and all you can say in answer to the question “Who is able to stand in the face of all this?” is “Not me. Not me. I don’t think I can stand one minute longer,” God gives you the gift of, well, a breather, a respite, a little bit of time to take a step back so that God can give you a renewed perspective on all that is happening.

And that is the gift we are given in Revelation 7.

Revelation 7 is a kind of interlude set between the opening of the sixth and seventh seals. There is a respite from the call for action that Revelation is. It is not an indefinite respite, but it is surely a much needed and holy one.

Four angels stand at the four corners of the earth holding back the destructive winds. Their mission is to hold back the judgments until God’s people can be “sealed.” (1)

Unlike the six seals mentioned earlier and the seventh seal still to be opened, this seal is most likely a type of signet device for embossing an imprint upon the seals that acted as binders for the apocalyptic scroll. These seals would have been worn as cylinder hung on a cord around the neck or mounted on a stone on a ring. (2) We might compare them to the branding that livestock receive on ranches in the Southwest. Or maybe another analogy is the passports that we carry when we travel outside the U.S. They are a mark of identity. And in this context, it seems to be very much related to the mark of identity that is Christian baptism.

With this seal, the seal of our baptism, God tenderly picks us up and holds us to her breast and fills us with her holy love to the point that all we can do is burp our contentment, then God lifts us up and proclaims to all the world, “This one belongs to me, and there is nothing that the world could ever do that would cause me to abandon my treasured child.”

The respite begins with the sealing of baptism and then it continues...with singing.

The words of Revelation 7: 17 recall images from the most beloved song in the Bible, the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm:

...For 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.

Robert Alexander sent an email this week, "As many of you know I have been at Montreat all week as the Keynote leader. I have been speaking each morning to 1200 teenagers about "Making a World of Difference." Today was a difficult day following the attack in Nice, France yesterday. It is so hard to know how we can make a difference in the world when terror continues to strike... As a last minute change to our morning schedule we sang together the hymn that is in our hymnal, "Goodness is stronger than evil." The words to this hymn were written by Desmond Tutu out of the experience of apartheid in South Africa. The full text is 'Goodness is stronger than evil. Love is stronger than hate. Light is stronger than darkness. Life is stronger than death. Victory is ours. Victory is ours through God who loves us.'"

The respite begins with the sealing of baptism. It continues with singing. And then comes...silence.

Many of you know that one of the weeks of my sabbatical leave earlier this year was five days of complete silence at Lebh Shomea House of Prayer, a community of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate. I have gotten lots of questions about the experience, "What was it like not to speak or be spoken to for five whole days?" and also reactions like, "That must have been really hard. I could never do something like that!"

My answer: yes, it was hard, but not in the way I expected. This week as I was sharing the story of creation with the elementary children at Vacation Bible School and when I came to the seventh day and how God rested, how God silenced the divine cell phone, turned off the divine TV, and put the Out of Office automatic replies on the divine email, I remembered that what was really hard wasn't the silence. (And you know...what I discovered is that the silence isn't actually all that silent. The birds aren't silent. The wild turkey wasn't silent. The breeze in the mesquite trees wasn't silent. But being silent, I heard all of this in a God-gifted way that I had never experienced before.) What was hard was coming back to the clamor, the noise, the information that assaults us from every direction every single moment of our wakefulness to the extent that it feels a lot like Pastor John wrote in Revelation 6 when he recounted how the earthquakes rocked and the mountains rolled. It was the noise that felt unnatural, not the silence. The silence...it was a gift that afforded clarity about my vocation.

I have a confession to make to you. I haven't been doing so great with the silence thing these days. I have to admit that the incessant drumbeat of news can become addictive. I came back from my sabbatical leave so committed to sticking with a half hour of daily silence, but I confess to you that the events of this summer have got me in a chokehold.

And so a gift that Revelation 7 has given to me in the midst of the horror and pain of these days is a nudge to commit myself to some silence, to turn off the noise, the information, for a half hour every day, and 24 hours once a week. (if God can do it for one day out of seven, then surely you and I can.) A half-hour of silence every day to be filled not with news, but transformed into prayer.

Prayer.

Because, you see, after the sealing of baptism, after the singing, after the silence, prayer is the final component of the respite.

Pastor John describes "a great quantity of incense to offer with the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar before the throne. And the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, rose before God."

As we entered Revelation 7, the question was dangling, unanswered, in the air, "Who is able to stand?"

And who knows, with the help of the One who has sealed the love of a shepherd in our baptisms and bolstered by the singing of our VBS kids, some silence during the coming week, and prayers lifted before God as incense, you and I just may be able to respond, "I am. We are. We are able to not only stand, but to head back out into the horror and pain of these days to stand up and stand out for God's own justice, love, and peace."

1. Barbara R. Rossing, *Journeys Through Revelation: Apocalyptic Hope for Today* (Louisville: Presbyterian Women Horizons, 2010), 40.
2. Brian K. Blount, *Revelation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 142.