

All Saints Sunday

November 1, 2020

Prelude: "For All the Saints"

Gathering

Call to Worship

Liturgist: I will extol the Lord at all times; his praise will always be on my lips.

All: I will glory in the Lord; let the afflicted hear and rejoice.

Liturgist: Glorify the Lord with me; let us exalt his name together.

Psalm 34: 1-3

All Singing: 540 "Holy God, We Praise Your Name"

God's Greeting

Passing the Peace

Reconciliation

Liturgist: I sought the Lord, and he answered me; he delivered me from all my fears.

All: Those who look to the Lord are radiant; their faces are never covered in shame.

Liturgist: This poor one called, and the Lord heard him; he saved him out of all his troubles.

All: Taste and see that the Lord is good; blessed are those who take refuge in him.

Liturgist: Fear the Lord, you his holy people, for those who fear him lack nothing.

Psalm 34: 4-9 adapted

Silent confession and reflection

Soloist: "Rescue Me"

Marjie Coleman

If I were to say no to you would you listen?
Would you find me if I sailed across the sea?
If I were to dive into the deepest canyon,
would you be at the bottom to rescue me?

Where can I go where your eyes can't follow?
What can I do to make you let go of my hand?
You say there is nothing in all creation
that can separate me from the love of the great I AM.

If I were to show you all the places I am broken
if you were to see all the things I hide away
would there still be a place for me at your table?
Would I still be your child at the end of the day?

O Holy God your love has found me.

O God your grace has set me free.
O Holy God I can feel your hand upon me.
O God have mercy on me.

O God will you rescue me?

Liturgist: The Lord redeems his servants; no one who takes refuge in him will be condemned.
Psalm 34:22

All: Therefore, let us love one another, for love comes from God.

Liturgist: Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.

All: This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only son into the world that we might live through him. This is love; not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

Liturgist: Therefore, dear friends, since God so loves us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.
1 John 4: 7-11

Proclamation

All Singing: 749 "Spirit of the Living God"

Scripture: Revelation 7: 9-17

After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb."

All the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying: "Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!"

Then one of the elders asked me, "These in white robes—who are they, and where did they come from?"

I answered, "Sir, you know."

And he said, "These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore, they are before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence. 'Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat down on them,' nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; 'he will lead them to springs of living water.' 'And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.'"

Minister: The Word of the Lord.

All: Thanks be to God.

Sermon: Ground Down

All Singing: 608 "Salvation Belongs to Our God"

Dedication

Prayers of the People

All Singing: “When the Saints Go Marching In”

African American spiritual

**We are traveling in the footsteps of those who’ve gone before,
And we’ll all be reunited on a new and sunlit shore.**

*Oh, when the saints go marching in
Oh, when the saints go marching in
Lord, how I want to be in that number
When the saints go marching in.*

**Some say this world of trouble is the only one we need,
But I'm waiting for that morning when the new world is revealed.**

**Oh, when the new world is revealed...
Oh, when the trumpet sounds its call...
Oh, when they gather 'round the throne...
Oh, when they crown him King of kings....**

Benediction

Worship Leaders

Pianist / Vocalist:	Erin Pacheco
Guitarist / Vocalist:	Moises Pacheco
Soloist / Vocalist:	Marjie Coleman
Liturgist / Prayer:	Lisa Dykstra
Sound Engineer:	Schuyler Roozeboom
Minister:	Roger Nelson

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Text: Revelation 7: 9-17
Title: Ground Down
Date: 11.01.20
Roger Allen Nelson

I saw a neighborhood friend at the neighborhood bar. We kept our distance and exchanged masked greetings. He offered the usual joke about ministers only working on Sundays and hounded me for refusing his offer to buy a drink. He was fidgeting with a tooth pick, watching his Diet Coke sweat, and wishing it was a cigarette and a beer. He's a recovering alcoholic battling cancer....

As he muttered about how a new prescription made him lethargic, his wife texted him to come home. That morning she left a jewelry catalogue on top of his briefcase – as if that would make their relationship healthier. He liked the buffer of the bar before being badgered. He talked about disruptions in the supply chain squeezing his profit margin and the health care costs for his employees gobbling up what remained. His kids couldn't hold jobs that paid for the lifestyle to which they were accustomed and he resented himself for always bailing them out. His voice trailed off....

He seemed weary, worn, ground down.
Where there once was swagger he now walked with a shuffle.
Where there once was a healthy tan there was now gray stubble.
Confidence and panache were clouded over with resignation.
He seemed weary, worn, ground down.

Sometimes we get ground down by life.
Maybe you know what I mean.

Chronic pain can grind you down.
A job with little joy or fulfillment can grind you down.
9 months of a pandemic with no clear finish line can grind you down.
A long loneliness can grind you down.
Whether you blame the 24-hour news industry, or social media, or the current president, or the raging socialists – the toxic tenor of today's political discourse can grind you down. The anxiety and unease that is just under the surface can grind you down.

You get the point.
Sometimes you can find yourself weary, worn, and ground down by life.

And then we turn to an ancient apocalyptic text with images that may tap the imagination, but can also feel utterly disconnected from reality and beyond the bounds of reason.

What are we to make of this on the week of an election?
When we can't even agree on how to respond to a virus, what are we to make of this?
What are we to make of this when we're ground down?

For church-going-Bible-reading-folks this passage unlocks a flood of memories and impressions. It has inspired great choral pieces, spawned diagrams and dispensational charts about the last days, and created pulp fiction like the "Late Great Planet Earth" or "Left Behind." For many it's

been a source of great comfort and great mystery, but what's often missed is that this heavenly vision includes a link to an earthly farm implement.

Consider....

The visionary sees as far as he can see people from every nation, tribe, ethnicity and language standing before the throne wearing white robes, holding palm branches and crying out that salvation belongs to God and to the Lamb. And,

Then one of the elders asked, "These in white robes – who are they, and where did they come from?" ... And he said, "These are they who have come out of the great tribulation..."

A *tribulum* was a wooden framed sled with bits of flint or metal fixed to the underside that was used for threshing grain. When it was hauled over the crop it would crudely begin to separate the wheat from the chaff. This simple cart – a *tribulum* – is part of the etymology for our word *tribulation*.

Tribulum that which oppresses, afflicts, and grinds down.

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In the middle of this heavenly vision there is a link to an earthly tribulation.

When we're afflicted it can feel as if we are being torn to pieces. When hardships roll over us it can seem as if we're being given a good threshing. Sometimes life can leave you beat down, shook out, and feeling like your self and your soul are separated – ground down.

Now. This text was written to encourage faith and inspire hope during a time of brutal persecution by the Roman Empire. It served as a beacon to draw people through times of deep difficult darkness. So, some read this text and the great tribulation as referring to the troubles of the early church.

Others see it as pointing to the end of time and to those who are sustained through a final cataclysmic series of woes. The intensity of persecution will rise to such a fever pitch so as to become the great final tribulation and it will separate the wheat from the chaff,
the sheep from the goats,
the gold from the gravel,
the faithful from the faithless.

And yet, still others read this text as a picture of all those throughout time who preserved through persecution.

Dear friends, any of those interpretations may be well and good. I'll leave the biblical wrangling to theological cowboys who ride bigger horses than I. But I'm hooked by the question:

Does this text have anything to say to us?

As relatively comfortable middle-class Americans in middle America,
even if we feel ground down right now,
does this text have anything to say to us?

Try this on for size.

Jesse Ventura was a Navy Seal, actor, professional wrestler and the Governor of Minnesota; in an interview in *Playboy* he famously said,

...religion is a sham and a crutch for weak-minded people who need strength.

Ventura gave voice to the idea that, while life may be difficult, faith is little more than a therapeutic tool or an inspirational bromide to help people cope. All we can actually count on is whatever pluck or luck we bring to the table. So, don't look outside of yourself. All of this religious apparatus may help but

it's just crutch to help you limp along,

it's just a way to help you cope,

it's just a façade to cover over the fact that we're in this alone.

Life may grind you down, but dig down deeper for this is all there is and all that matters.

But....

And this is a big but....

But! The central conviction of the Christian gospels is that there is a God who is outside of us – a God who creates us, sustains us, and ultimately delivers us from death and sin and all of its dire consequences.

And as that is true, this text is a glimpse of all those that God promised to Abraham – more than the stars of the heavens or the sands of the sea – gathered before the throne of God waving palm branches in victory because they were delivered from the threshing of this world.

“Our World Belongs to God – A Contemporary Testimony” puts it this way:

Rebel cries sound through the world: some, crushed by failure or hardened by pain, give up on life and hope and God; others, shaken, but still hoping for human triumph work feverishly to realize their dreams....

But rebellion and sin can never dethrone God. He does not abandon the work of his hand; the heavens still declare his glory. He promised a Savior; now the whole creation groans in the birth pangs of a new creation.

The promise of the Christian gospels, and this vision of John, point toward an ending that overwhelms, or overcomes, or ultimately resolves whatever tribulation this world knows.

And that consummation of creation is not a matter of our doing, or even something that we earn by a mix of faith and works, but it is wholly and solely the work of God in Christ.

To Jesse Ventura and my neighborhood friend that sounds like magical thinking. They would have you believe that this is all there is, so side with the mean and the mighty. If religion is a sham and faith a crutch then naked self-interest is all that matters....

I need more than that.

And, therefore, I may be a fool, but I'll be a fool for Christ and Christ crucified. It may be weakness but I want, I hope, I long for the gospel of a God that has not abandoned us, even in tribulation, but has entered in, suffered with and for us, even unto death, and is resurrected.

That story doesn't end on the threshing floor.

That story doesn't end with the rise and fall of empires.

That story doesn't end with self-interest on the throne.

Instead, on the other side of tribulation we are gathered – all nations, tongues, tribes, ethnicities, political parties, black and white, gay and straight, young and old, the bruised and the broken, the ground down.... We are all gathered before the throne in victory.

That vision is a beacon in the fog for me. That vision is a source of hope in tribulation and there is therefore something more than self-interest to live for. I find in that vision courage for the living of these days.

So, dear friends, when life grinds you down and you feel defeated,
when dark clouds hover on the horizon,
remember that tribulation is not the last word,
remember that God in Christ sits on the throne,
remember that even in death our hope is in resurrection.
For...

Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb. Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever.

Amen.