

The Elephant, The Donkey and The Lamb
Revelation 7: 9-17
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For the long time listener, this story may sound familiar. On October 12th, Bay Village Ohio police received a phone call reporting that a homeless person was sleeping on a park bench adjacent to the St. Barnabas Episcopal Church. Upon reaching out to the church it was discovered that not only was this not a human person but rather a statue, it was not just a statue of any person but rather a statue of Jesus.



Yes, *Homeless Jesus*, a statue by Canadian sculptor Timothy Schmalz, strikes again. This may sound familiar because Don Lincoln shared a similar story a few years back that took place at a different church in Davidson, NC. **(Remove photo)** What struck me about this particular chapter in this statue's story is that the call to the police happened just twenty minutes after the statue was installed. This is 2020 people and times are tough.

Now, it is quite possible the call was placed not out of suspicion but a genuine desire to help if there was a person in need. But for me, the simple tag line of homeless Jesus statue reported to police 20 minutes after installation kind of typifies our moment. Through everything we are collectively going through it feels like our instinctual drives are trending toward suspicion and differentiation of the other.

It began with the pandemic as we all were trying to figure out life with masks, gloves, and disinfectant, assuming, for our own safety, that anyone we passed in the grocery store was a potential threat to our health. Then, layer upon layer was added to that as a public health crisis led to an economic crisis along with an education crisis. Meanwhile protests calling for racial justice have emerged around the country along with counter-protests. Oh, and all of this in an election season. It feels like there is all this momentum toward a binary way of being in the world - you're either this or that; Republican or Democrat; you wear masks or you don't; you either support black or blue lives. There is little room for nuance or complexity. And it's exhausting.

But, not for the first time this year, the lectionary has provided a text that I believe is perfect for this moment. We need something to expand our view of reality, to show us

that there is something beyond this present moment. And oh does the book of Revelation deliver! This vision the writer John has from the 7th chapter has got it all.

There is a great multitude from every nation; every tribe, people, and language standing before the throne and the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. There's angels, elders, four living creatures, and they fall on their faces in worship. They break out in song together praising God. One of the elders tells John in the vision that the great multitude will be sheltered by God. They will hunger no more and thirst no more; neither sun nor scorching heat will strike them. The Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, guiding them to springs of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Sounds pretty great right? In the words of Tina Fey's character from 30 Rock Liz Lemon "I want to go to there." I mean, it's almost too good to be true.

So, when we encounter a text like this, what are we supposed to do with it? Or perhaps, what is it supposed to do with us? It's worth mentioning that Revelation is a very difficult book to read. It has turned away its fair share of readers because, honestly, it is very, very strange to our modern ears. It hasn't helped that modern interpreters have done some very, very strange things with it. But first we need to recognize that with Revelation, we are dealing with the genre of apocalyptic Biblical literature.

In her book *Inspired*, Rachel Held Evans explains it like this: "Apocalypse means 'unveiling' or 'disclosing.' An apocalyptic event or vision, therefore, reveals things as they really are. It peels back the layers of pomp and pretense, fear and uncertainty, to expose the true forces at work in the world.

So, like other apocalyptic texts, this vision of John is not painting a picture of some event to take place in the distant future. The book of Revelation is not some blueprint with secret clues to be figured out several millennia later and adapted into a Nicolas Cage movie. Like other apocalyptic texts, Revelation was written to a beleaguered faith community struggling to hope in the face of an oppressive empire. Quite simply, it is a text for resistance.

What might it say to us today, beleaguered and struggling to hope amidst the crises we face? Well, the vision John shares in chapter 7 is both cosmic and intimate. And everything about it from the white robes, to the palm branches, to the songs of salvation suggest that this is a victory celebration. Through the lamb that was slain God has already won the decisive victory over evil and its power in the world. Though we might not be able to see it clearly, our present struggles too shall pass because nothing is a match for the goodness, righteousness, and justice of God. Over the next several weeks and beyond so much of our discourse will be dominated by whether the party of the elephant or the donkey wins the presidential election. But for the Christian, we must maintain and prioritize our peculiar identity as citizens of the kingdom of God and of the Lamb. And we must hold our officials accountable, those we voted for and those we did not as citizens of God's kingdom.

Kingdoms of the earth rise and fall, but the victory of God and the Lamb has already been won. That's the cosmic; now the intimate. The elder tells John in the vision that the multitude robed in white, waving palm branches are those who have come out of the great ordeal. Actually, the verb tense implies an ongoing action in the present. It could be translated "these are ones coming out from the great suffering." They are the saints, the Church Triumphant. The ones who now belong to God in death. They are the giants of the faith whose names we would all recognize.

They are the countless others whose names are known to but a few, whose memories are kept alive in the legacies of faith they have left behind. In the midst of this great victory won by God and the Lamb, the beauty and intimacy of verses 15-17 is astonishing.

For this reason they are before the throne of God,
and worship him day and night within his temple,
and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them.
They will hunger no more, and thirst no more;
the sun will not strike them,
nor any scorching heat;
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."

So in the midst of this grand description of the victory of God and the celebration in the heavenly throne room, imagery that stretches our imagination; in the midst of all of that it is also equally part of who God is to see and to honor and to heal our pain and wipe away our tears. But that is the way of the Lamb, the way of the saints before us, and the way for us.

As those belonging to the Lamb, may we move forward in the midst of the challenges of our time, part of this beautiful communion of saints, bringing the reality of heaven to earth. As Jesus suffered and died for us may we be a healing presence in the face of the world's suffering. May we reject a binary way of being in the world and instead offer a Trinitarian way that seeks hospitality, mystery, and complexity. And may we hear the far-off melody of the victory song of God and the Lamb and make it our song this day and every day. Amen.

Resources

Homeless Jesus - <https://www.clevescene.com/scene-and-heard/archives/2020/10/15/in-bay-village-someone-called-cops-on-a-sleeping-homeless-person-it-was-a-statue-of-jesus>

Evans, Rachel Held. *Inspired: Slaying Giants, Walking on Water, and Loving the Bible Again*. Nelson Books, 2018.