

I am referencing again this week C. S. Lewis' book from the Narnia Chronicles series, The Last Battle. In one of the final chapters, after Aslan has dealt with the Dwarfs, the group moves deeper and deeper in to the new land and as they travel further and further in they meet more and more people and "creatures". So it is with John's visions. With each vision the group of people surrounding God in worship grows larger and larger and more and more diverse. Now we have a number "*no one could count.*" Differences disappear and the only concern of those gathered is the praise and celebration of God – All are One in Christ.

These are they...

Now I wondered when the Lectionary was prepared why they paired the text in Revelation with the 23rd Psalm. However, as I read and reread this most familiar of Psalms I began to notice things.

- * It is a song of God's faithfulness through all of life.
- * It is a song filled with the promises of God not only for today but also for tomorrow.
- * It is a song of hope for those going through dark valleys, even death.
- * It is a song that ends in the presence of God with a banquet beyond imagination.
- * It is a song of the faithful – these are they who have been faithful to God and who have walked with God and God with them.

These are they... In John's vision, who have stood firmly with the Lamb. The image is one of a God who loves beyond measure. Do you hear a reflection of the Beatitudes in these lines?

- * These are they who hunger and thirst no more.
- * These are they who have fought for righteousness and peace.
- * There is now no more disaster, no more death to separate.
- * God is now present to wipe the tears from their eyes, to bring comfort.

I thought of these verses particularly this past week. I was visiting for Hospice and one of the folk I visited finds hope and solace in the old hymns of faith, the hymns of her childhood. One of her favorites is "The Old Rugged Cross" (one of the reasons we sang it this morning – I needed to be reminded of the words!) As I said the words for her (I did not sing it for her) tears came to her eyes. She was looking forward to the promise of God one day wiping those tears from her eyes. Who are these? These are they who have walked in faith with God and who are now come to the very presence of God and the fulfillment of the promise of God. These are they who from all ages have received and experienced God's grace.

Again this week my question is: Is this a future vision for John or a present reality in the Church? Or both? There are those whose faith have taken root and whose root systems goes down deep into the soil of faith. The storms have come and gone (maybe some are still in the middle of persecutions who are reading this letter—Remember John is not on Patmos for a vacation, he is in exile) but they have kept the faith. They have experienced the valleys and have kept the course. Ups and downs are a part of life. They have not left the journey because of the down turns of life. These are the faithful of Hebrews 11 and of all history. They may have found a stronger faith because of the valleys.

There are those days when we may want to shout, "Stop the world I want to get off." We wonder how much more we can take. How much longer we can endure the pain, loneliness, the suffering. Yet, something emerges within us that keeps us moving forward,

even if it is only one painful step at a time. We continue on knowing the promise is that God is walking the journey with us even in the deepest, darkest valleys – even the valley of the shadow of death.

We are not alone. There is one who walks beside us. It is our faith in God that sustains us. We somehow find the courage to move forward. We know we are not alone. There is one who holds us up, allows us to lean on his shoulders. We find faith where faith should not be found. Faith is not easy. Faith is believing in the impossible, the impractical and the unknown. It says there is something better coming even though we cannot see or hear it in the distant future – we know with a calm assurance that better days are coming.

These are they... in some ways John is talking about us, God's family. He is seeing the inclusive family of God. (May sound like a broken record but our world today seems to want to exclude rather than include certain peoples.) John cannot identify any one particular people, group, language or dialect in this gathering around God's presence. We cannot claim exclusive rights to God. God's family is a family of the world. We, therefore, need to be concerned about the whole world. God's family is in Haiti, Chile, China, the Sudan, Timbuktu or the person next door! God's family is a rainbow family – the vision of John is a vision of our brothers and sisters in Christ. John sees a global community, one that cannot be counted.

Peggy and I commented this morning about an email from Virgil and Lynn Nelson who are now volunteering for three months in the city she was in in China. I am sure Peggy recalls to mind the trip and the people from her visit – the good news is “these are they...”

Also, the weekly International Ministries update tells the story of a young boy left at an orphanage that Corinne Garrison and Philip Smith (our ABC missionaries there) have contact with. The boy was about four when his mother was killed in an accident and his father was unable to care for him. After months of not interacting he slowly began to open up. This past February he gave his teacher/care giver a gift. The other students made fun of him as he handed her a half used bottle of perfume. He told his teacher that this was his mother's and he wanted her to have it. “This is now one of her most cherished possessions.” Again, “These are they...”

This is God's message to a church that is beginning to have an impact on the whole world. It is God's message to a church that is becoming more and more inclusive rather than exclusive.

I remember a song from a few years ago about God's family growing larger – as more and more people come in and the circle becomes larger and larger God simply reaches out and draws the circle larger. There is no limit to the circle God draws. This is a new vision of the church for John and the people John is writing to. John is sharing a vision of heaven that was not even in their wildest imagination – peoples of every nation, tribe, language and dialect gathered in praise of God. This is a message to a people who thought they were the only ones chosen. They are now learning that God has chosen more than they could image.

May God open our eyes as he opened John's and those of the early Church.

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quoted is from NRSV, NCCC/USA 1989
NIV, New International Bible Society, Zondervan, 1989
Lewis, C.S., The Last Battle, Collier Books, 1970 (1956),