

1 John 2:24-25, 3:1-2 (New Revised Standard Version)

Let what you heard from the beginning abide in you. If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, then you will abide in the Son and in the Father. And this is what he has promised us, eternal life. See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.

Revelation 7:9-17 (New Revised Standard Version)

After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice, saying, 'Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!' And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshipped God, singing, 'Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God for ever and ever! Amen.' Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, 'Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?' I said to him, 'Sir, you are the one that knows.' Then he said to me, 'These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. 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.'

I am generally a bit hesitant about preaching from Revelation,
not because it isn't God's word and truth that we need to hear,

but because it has been so shamelessly exploited
by those who pervert **its wonderful message of hope**
for their own purpose of greed and financial gain...

... the slick guys in polyester suits selling books and videos on TV.

But if you check your Bible, the title of the book is not,
"details about the terrifying judgment of God at the end of time",
it is, "**The Revelation of Jesus Christ to John.**"

When the book of Revelation was written, the situation was dire.
The current emperor, Domitian had decided that Christianity
was disrupting the unity of the Roman empire
so he set out to destroy the Christian Church once & for all.

Under that persecution, the suffering of the Church was extreme,
and to be a Christian at that time
meant that you and your family might be tortured or killed,
and the cost of your church membership might be your life.

The Church was suffering and discouraged by that persecution.
The book Revelation was written and circulated
to encourage them, urging them to remain steadfast and faithful...
... by reminding them about the God we serve...

... and that absolutely,
hope and light still shine even in the darkest circumstance,
as we read in John 1:5,
The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

Revelation follows a pattern of terrifying scenes of violence
followed by amazing scenes of hope, of heavenly praise and worship...
... such as our passage today, **a scene of worship in heaven**, vs. 9
... and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all
tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm
branches in their hands.

This is the ultimate gathering of all God's beloved people
from of every place and every time throughout the ages, gathered,
in vast numbers and rich diversity beyond human comprehension,
all drawn together by the one thing that actually matters-

- that **our God reigns** and will fulfill his saving-purpose: vs. 10
"Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!"

The Lamb of course refers to the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.
The white robes are a theological symbol of gracious salvation,
for a white robe means to put on the righteousness of Christ,
to be cleansed, healed, rescued & saved by the grace of God.

It is also important to note that the robes are white not because
they've kept them clean or washed them by their own good works,
but through Christ our robes, our lives are washed clean...
... like the robe given the prodigal son, to cover his shame & restore him to family.

The palm branches they carry
were an ancient symbol for the joyful celebration of a victory.
John's message for these beleaguered and suffering Christians
came as a reassurance of hope & God's promise of ultimate victory...

...characterized by the joyful wonder of heavenly worship. vs. 11, 16-17
and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshipped God, singing, 'Amen! ... 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.'

From that passage drawn from the prophet Isaiah I see an image
of God sitting on his throne and I'm like a child sitting on his lap
while he wipes away all my tears and fears, my shame and regret.

That is the heart and grace of the message we read in Revelation,
a lesson in grace being spoken to a troubled and suffering people.
It's a word of hope for that fragile and persecuted Church
during their time of terrible struggle & harsh ordeal...
... to live in hope, b/c whatever else is going on, our God still reigns.

Here the author recasts hopeful images from the OT prophet Isaiah,
borrowing language which was written many centuries earlier,
to address the Hebrew people suffering and discouraged
during the terrible time of exile in distant Babylon...
... as a reminder that God cared, and was with them sustaining them.

Notice the promise and hope, Isaiah 25:8-9

Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken. It will be said on that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us. This is the Lord for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.

* It may have seemed like the Babylonians held all the power,
but the message was to hope, to trust and rely on God,
... for far more was in play than just the trouble they could see.

**John's point was that as a fact of history they did return from exile,
and Israel's suffering of the exile was not how their story ended.**

So too the Church suffering under Domitian's harsh persecution,
was also serving that same powerful and grace-filled God...

... the God of grace who gives strength to the weary, worn and worried,
who gives peace and joy to the crushed, wounded and brokenhearted,
including support to those struggling under Domitian's power.

**And though suffering and tribulation may be threaten to overwhelm,
yet hopeful is the truth, the Lord's promise of ultimate victory.**

Yes, they saw the reality of their suffering and persecution,
but could still listen for hope, the heavenly praise and worship,
that proclaims the goodness, faithfulness, truth & power of God...
... which is the same crucial truth we need to hear and remember today.

So amid the challenges and uncertainties of our lives, these times,
we too may wonder and we may ask, where is the Lord in all this?,
and why does God allow such terrible circumstances to happen?

Very early in my ministry as a younger man fresh out of seminary,
I struggled with those same **questions that defy easy answers.**
My first call as a pastor was to a new church just getting started
in a little fishing community along the North Carolina coast...

... where we were hit dead-on by a terrible and destructive hurricane.
I had never seen or experienced anything like that before.
Then over the next few years, one or two hurricanes hit every year,
and the destruction was crushing, faithful members moved away.

It was a time of anxiety & tragedy, a sense of powerlessness and loss,
and at the same time in our little congregation of around 100 folks,
10 of our members were all facing life-threatening illnesses.

It was difficult and discouraging and felt overwhelming.

I ran out of easy answers and didn't know what to say or do.

So one evening we gathered together as a family of faith,
and with the lights dimmed, we sat in a big circle,
while we prayed and worshipped the Lord, together.

I read a few Scripture passages, we sang a few favorite hymns,

and then we talked and prayed, we sat in silence together ...
... we cried out to the Lord, and we hugged one another,
and truly, we worshipped the Lord our God as one.

And God was very present and comforting with us in our worship,
and from that we found renewed hope, the courage & strength to go on.
**Something incredibly powerful and wonderful
happened to us that night in our worship together.**

We still had to contend with hurricanes for several more years,
and some of the folks survived their cancer, and others did not.

Though our circumstances continued to be difficult and unsettling,
yet we had renewed hope and trust that God was with us
that God cared, and God's grace & power would sustain us...

... for though there many reasons for worry, sadness & disappointment,
yet the sweet music of hope, God's promise could still be heard...
... as together, **our tears, our fears and sense of loss
became a sense of trust in the assurances of God.**

As our reading from 1st John points out: vs. 2:23-3:1

Let what you heard from the beginning abide in you. If what you heard from the beginning abides in you,
then you will abide in the Son and in the Father. And this is what he has promised us, eternal life. See what love
the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; **and that is what we are.**

So how do we live faithfully into that hope, that truth and promise?

Our faith and spiritual life, our walk with God, our discipleship,
these function something like the early solar-powered calculators...
... that without consistent light shining on the cells,
the screen would pretty quickly fade & stop working.

So too our sense of hope and trust in God will quickly weaken and fade,
we'll find ourselves feeling overwhelmed, anxious & discouraged...
...if we're not intentional and consistent with our abiding in the Lord
through prayer, Bible reading, fellowship and discipleship,
& remembering who & whose we are, **the beloved children of God.**

All Saints Sunday is about remembering who we are at the Lord's Table,
and that others have endured harsh struggles and terrible ordeals,
and by God's abiding presence, remained steadfast in their faith...

... for no matter what, the Lamb still sits on the throne in heaven,
who came to save sinners, who abides with us, who will come again,
and nothing will defeat the One who loves the children of God.

As we read earlier, (3:1)

See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; **and that is what we are.**