

THE SAINTS THROUGHOUT THE WORLD
Revelation 21: 1-6a

The book of Revelation ends on a high note. After taking the reader through the struggles facing seven churches in western Turkey and the apocalyptic upheavals facing the whole world, this strange and curious book concludes with a glorious resolution. All our trials are put behind us. The tumultuous sea as the source of chaos, the night, all that is under God's curse, grief, crying, pain, and death will be no more. And now the sovereign God over the entire universe declares, "See, I am making all things new."

In other words, this "tale told by idiot signifying nothing" turns out to have meaning after all. A new heaven and a new earth replace the worn out cosmos. The holy city, the New Jerusalem comes down from heaven adorned as a bride for her husband in all her splendor. The world has become young again, forever fresh and resplendent. If ever there were a "happily ever after", this is it! The end of the story is the beginning of perpetual springtime in the presence of God. The conclusion creates a new story better than we could have ever imagined.

So on this All Saints Day, we gather in hope. Hope for our future, hope for those who have gone before us, hope for our brothers and sisters throughout the world, hope for all the saints. The saints are those summoned by God to join in that eternal chorus of praise. The saints indeed will come marching in and gather in eternal joy before God who made us and redeemed us.

Throughout the book of Revelation saints are ever-present. The saints on earth are locked in a battle with the beast rising from the sea, a government that has become oppressive. John imprisoned on the island of Patmos struggles to maintain his courage in the face of persecution. The saints in the seven churches struggle to maintain their witness in the face of opposition. Then there are saints gathered before God who offer ceaseless praise, casting their crowns before the throne singing, "You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things". (Rev. 4: 11) Like a Greek chorus, the saints in heaven urge on the struggling church below, as they sing praises to God above.

The saints are pictured as twenty-four elders who perpetually sing a new song to the Lamb who alone is worthy of all praise. Furthermore, John sees a "great multitude 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 singing, ‘Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne and to the Lamb.’”(Rev. 7:9-10) Heaven and earth are filled with saints giving glory and honor to the One who was, who is, and who shall be forevermore.

In our passage in Revelation 21, these words ring out, “See, the home of God is among mortals. God will dwell with them; they will be his people, and God himself will be with them.” God desires fellowship with the saints created in God’s image and redeemed by the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. Immanuel, God with us, that is the promise made to us. God with us, God for us, God among us giving us light and hope and joy. What a promise! What a hope!

As you know, I just returned from two weeks in China on our Synod’s mission tour. Velma McConnell, Mark Wesselman, and I from St. Andrew joined a seventeen-member delegation that traveled to six different cities all over China. We visited with Church leaders and government officials and aid workers throughout this vast nation of 1.3 billion souls. So many things to share, so little time.

I want you to know this, the promise of the book of Revelation is being realized in remarkable ways in China. In the face of many struggles, the saints of China are flourishing and growing. And in the two churches we visited, above the cross in the front of the sanctuary are these words in Chinese characters, “God is with us-Immanuel”. We asked our interpreter if these words are found in other congregations, and he answered that those words are very common in Chinese church sanctuaries. God is with them in amazing ways, after all these years of struggle.

Let me share with you some reflections upon three saints that I met on our trip to China. We had lunch with a pastor in Hsian who is in his 80’s. By the way, in the church in China, the usual retirement age for pastors is 75! This pastor was the product of the missionary movement, the Christian church’s effort to spread the Good News in China. The Presbyterian Church was one such active missionary presence in China in the 19th and early 20th Centuries.

When the Communists took over China in 1949, many of the churches were closed and the Christian missionaries were expelled. The church suffered many hardships during the 50’s and 60’s. Then during Mao’s Cultural Revolution from 1966 until 1976 the churches were simply closed down. The pastor I had lunch with was imprisoned for 13 years! Thirteen years, simply because he was a Christian pastor.

As we feasted on Chinese food, this short man with a huge grin told us how the church has seen a “resurrection” since the early 80’s. Though it is not completely free of government regulations, the church is witnessing dramatic growth everywhere. He himself had begun what we would call a Christian school for high school and junior college students in Hsian. We visited that school and were amazed at the ambitious plans they have for its growth into a full-fledged seminary.

This beloved saint couldn’t be more grateful for the progress the Good News is making in China. This church leader, who like John on the island of Patmos was imprisoned for his faith, sees God with us, Immanuel, doing amazing things in China. He is the face of the church in China that has endured so much and now is delighted with what is happening in his beloved homeland.

In Nanjing we visited the largest seminary in China with nearly 600 students. It is a brand new campus, larger than any seminary campus I have ever seen. The government gave them the land and helped build the buildings, including a sanctuary under construction that will seat 3000 worshippers. Incidentally, the churches in China are packed and have multiple services on Sunday. We witnessed those packed sanctuaries in Nanjing and Hsian, old missionary church buildings now entirely inadequate for the number of worshippers. Indeed, I witnessed my first ever bicycle traffic jam after worship, Christians leaving one service while other Christians were coming for the next service. What a sight-bicycle gridlock!

At the seminary at Nanjing five seminary students talked to our group. One of these students seems to me to be the face of the new emerging church in China. She is young and she is passionate, ever so eager to get back to her home church to help spread the Good News. She shared her joy in studying Paul’s letters and his sermon on Mars Hill in Acts 17. She spoke English quite well, a skill that will help her immensely in the new China. How I would love to sponsor her to come to the United States and tell us about the Good News she has experienced in the country she loves. She is the face of the newly emerging church of China, so full of hope and promise.

On the long flight back from Beijing, by the grace of God I sat by an American man who was completing his forty-first trip to China. A Virginia in his 70’s, Woody as he called himself was trained in Mandarin Chinese in his military days. After 20 plus years in the Marines, he taught school, specializing in Chinese history. Then Woody began taking Americans to China to teach short term English classes. He has found the Chinese to be extremely eager to learn English.

Woody is a deeply committed Christian with a great love for the Chinese people. He told me amazing stories of relating to the “unregistered churches”, the so-called “underground church”. He talked of their passion and the risks they take, especially when they try to evangelize openly at work or on the street corners. Many are warned and then imprisoned in work camps typically for two years. The relationship of the government and the churches is still a complicated dance, at once friendly and yet uncertain. As I listened for hours to Woody’s stories, I realized how little I really understand about this complex organism called the Chinese church.

But in the stories Woody told me, I realized once again that the Chinese people are amazing! The church has countless saints in this country growing by leaps and bounds. The church in China has indeed experienced a “resurrection” that fills their sanctuaries with saints of all ages. That old pastor in Hsian who spent 13 years in prison and that eager young seminary student in Nanjing who loves New Testament study have seen wonders and miracles in their lifetime.

All I can do is give thanks “for all the saints”-those still struggling here and those above who sing forever, “Holy, holy, holy, heaven and earth are filled with your glory!” Thanks be to God. Amen.