

To the Glory of God

A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on November 1, 2020
Friendship Presbyterian Church

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." (Revelation 7:9-17, NRSV)

Over the last two Sundays, we have explored our Stewardship theme "Ever, Only, All for Thee," inspired by the final verse of that great hymn "Take My Life and Let it Be." That verse expresses beautifully a total consecration to God – a recognition that we are not our own.

We plumbed the story of Jesus' confrontation with Pharisees and Herodians over whether tax should be paid to Caesar or not, and we boldly confessed that we do not belong to the Caesars – of that day, or of our own. We instead belong "body and soul, in life and in death," to God, and because *God's own image* is stamped on *us*, we are to "give to God what is God's."

And then, last week, we saw that we *do* this – that we give God what is due God – as we live into the "main thing" in life: To love the Lord our God with all our hearts, and all our souls, and

all our minds, and to love our neighbors as ourselves. And that this journey of Love is, in every moment and in every way, borne up by *God's* own unfathomable love for *us* – for *all* of us.

Today, we wrap up our Fall Stewardship emphasis, and bring it all home, so to speak. In our scripture text, we are privy to a moving and majestic scene: A vision of Heaven in which the redeemed – the saints – of all nations, languages, and races stand before the Divine Throne in white robes and waving palm branches. They raise the note of eternal praise, and joined by angels, and archangels, and all the company of Heaven, they worship the Lord without ceasing. It is a scene of elation and joy:

*Blessing and glory and wisdom
and thanksgiving and honor
and power and might
be to our God forever and ever!*

Last week we said that the "main thing" in life is loving the Lord our God with all our hearts, souls, and minds, and loving our neighbors as ourselves. And here we see the ultimate expression of this love in never-ending worship – engaging *whole* hearts and souls and minds!

And this is the way it should be. I'm reminded of one the first and greatest theological lessons I learned as a 4th-grade confirmand. Those of you who are life-long Presbyterians may remember memorizing some questions and answers from the Westminster Shorter Catechism as part of your Sunday Schooling or Confirmation studies. Now, I'll say it: Catechisms are – in my humble opinion – a terrible way to learn the truths of our faith. And in the case of this one, most of us never really got past the first question. But that first question and its answer are so packed with meaning and beauty, that I dare say we got what we needed.

The first question is "What is the chief end of man?" This is something like asking "What is the main thing?" as we saw last week. It's a question that speaks to our *purpose* ... to what we were made for ... to what ultimately fulfills us, to what can fully and finally satisfy and free the human heart ... the human soul ... the human mind.

And the answer? "Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy Him forever."

To glorify God, and to *enjoy* Him forever. As if in glorifying God, in loving God, and in loving those created in the image of God, we *would* enjoy Him forever ... laughing and rejoicing with all that we are ... healed and refreshed in endless springs of the water of life. What a vision!

But someone may say, "STOP. This just isn't the world we live in. This is all too cheery. All this love and joy is too far off – too heavenly – to be any earthly good." Fair enough. I can understand someone who would hear all this as dreamy escapism – not that we all don't feel like escaping sometimes.

The truth is, it may sometimes feel like things are falling apart around us: COVID-19 and needless deaths ... violence in our streets ... the awful legacy and present reality of racial injustice ... the creeping catastrophe of our rapidly changing climate ... division, hatred, and mistrust ... political chaos and Machiavellian power plays ... the list goes on. And so, we might justly ask if focusing on this scripture, and its snapshot of Heavenly worship, and our “glorifying God and enjoying Him forever” is little more than sticking our heads in the sand. So much seems to be going wrong, and this is what we’re thinking about?

To the glory of God! Amen.

Yes, this is *exactly* what we are thinking about, because this is what Jesus’ call to us requires. Sure, some of us are out in the trenches of the world actively engaged in battles for the good and against the wrong. Some of us watch and pray and spread peace and love one heart at a time. But whether we’re “out there” or behind the scenes, most of us struggle to keep our own heads above water, as we still ask what it is that we can do to make a difference in the face of so much that is broken.

But whatever shape our strivings and struggles take, still Sunday comes, and we gather in Spirit as we do today, and we try to hear scriptures like this, and worship, and be confronted with words of joy, hope, and challenge. And we say that because of our baptism, we must not despair, but worship and glorify God by speaking the truth in love, working for peace and justice, and caring for one another.

And then we “go out” into the world again and work with a new set of challenges, and then come together again the following Sunday to worship and pray and sing and re-affirm once more. And then the next, and then the next. It is a holy calling we have, and yes, sometimes what we do can seem ridiculous, but just maybe we need these times to be reminded of who we are and what we’re about ... what our purpose is ... what we were made for ... and be lifted up as the depths rage around us.

You see, we were made for God. That’s the truth. And the truth of God is that salvation and power and glory belong to God alone, not to any powers of this world no matter what they claim or how threatening they may be. And so, it is that we offer all of ourselves to God, and pray and sing with whole hearts, souls, and minds,

*Take my life and let it be
Consecrated, Lord, to Thee.
Take my moments and my days;
Let them flow in ceaseless praise,
Let them flow in ceaseless praise.*

*Take my love; my Lord, I pour
At Thy feet its treasure store.
Take myself, and I will be
Ever, only, all for Thee,
Ever, only, all for Thee.*