

“After this...”

That’s how the reading we just heard from Revelation 7 starts – “after this...” It begs the question, doesn’t it?... After what?

I think that is the right question to ask when it comes to the portion of Revelation 7 we are focusing on for a little while this morning because I don’t think you can fully appreciate Revelation 7:9-17 unless you know what comes before it. I don’t think you can appreciate a day like today, Good Shepherd Sunday, unless you know the answer to that question: After what?

So let’s answer that question...

Revelation is a fascinating book of the Bible. It has developed a reputation as a unique and therefore often intimidating book, but that reputation doesn’t need to scare us away.

John, one of the disciples of Jesus, was living in exile on an island in the Mediterranean Sea when he was shown a series of visions (kind of like living pictures, or short-story movies) that only he got to see, but he was told to write down what he saw. And these living pictures were like interpretive art – through vivid imagery they give us glimpses into the future of this world and God’s plan for this world. The uniqueness of this kind of literature and the vivid and sometimes foreign images John saw make Revelation an interesting book, to say the least. But at the same time, for all of the foreignness, the uniqueness, the strangeness, the message of Revelation is really quite simple – Jesus wins. The message of the visions of Revelation is simply the same message Jesus shared with his disciples once, before he died: **In this world you will have trouble**, Jesus said, **but take heart, I have overcome the world**.

Revelation 7:9-17 is the end of the second of seven different visions that John recorded in this fascinating book. And so, if we are going to understand the end of this vision, we need to know the rest of the vision, we need to know the answer to that question, after what?

In this second vision John saw seven seals being opened up one at a time (seals were a way of verifying the source of important documents or things, in ancient Israel they would use lumps of clay, later they would use wax, and you would press a signet ring or a little engraved scroll on that clay and wax to leave a unique mark on that clay or wax, and when that clay or wax hardened it would seal the letter until the right person, the intended reader of that letter, came and broke that seal to see what was inside). So, John sees this vision of seven seals being broken and a visual message comes out from each seal.

As the first six seals are opened up, one by one, (again, giving John and us a glimpse of what will happen in this world in the future) there is nothing but bad news - bad news that remind us of the first half of Jesus’ promise for this world – that **“in this world you will have trouble”** part.

God’s promise at the beginning of this vision, God’s promise for the future of this world is that this world will be a bad place to live – a place where there will be wars and rumors of wars, a place where powerful people will abuse, misuse, and subject weaker people, a place where people will fight and bicker and disown each other, a place where people will be cheated and hurt and robbed, a place where people will suffer and die at each other’s hands and a place where people will suffer and die at the hand of nature – plagues and famines, and earthquakes.

That’s God’s promise for the future of this world to John... sound familiar?

Does that sound at least a little familiar to every news broadcast you have heard your entire life? This last week for me I heard about horrible flooding in Texas, another famous person died, another helpless kid was sexually assaulted by an adult, the suicide crisis in Greenland (where it’s almost becoming a trend or a fad to kill yourself), more big powerful businesses abusing their power, and on and on and on it goes...

“In this world you will have trouble...” The promise of God.

And this isn’t some academic exercise this morning where we just look and see that, sure enough, God was right, other people in this world are suffering. No, for each and every one of us, the truth of this promise of God hits home because our life are defined by suffering. One thing that each and every one of us here today have in common is this, we are all suffering.

I don’t care if you are 5, 15, or 55 years old, I know for a fact that each and every one of you is suffering right now, in some way. And you know much better than I do all of those things you are going through right now that make you grumble, make you sad, make you cry, break your heart...

God’s promise at the beginning of this vision to John is, in this world you will have trouble... sound familiar? What you are going through right now, whatever it is, whether you think it a big suffering or little suffering, it is all suffering and it is all exactly what God promised.

And really, when you look at this world, when you look at your own heart, it’s really a no brainer that this world is so full of suffering because the root cause of all this pain and suffering and death, well, I see a good deal of that root cause of suffering right here in my heart... sin - my sins that cause the people around me to suffer, and their sins that cause me to suffer, and sin in general that has broken this world.

And it gets worse. Not only does God promise that we will suffer in general in this world because of our sins and the sins of those around us, he also promises in these first six seals of this vision that this world will be bad *especially for believers*.

In the fifth seal that opens up John sees this image of people who were killed for no other reason than that they believed in Jesus. Their souls are before

God and they are asking him, “How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?”

Then John tells us this: “Then each of them was given a white robe, and they were told to wait a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and brothers who were to be killed as they had been was completed.”

The message for us: get ready fellow Christian. Get ready to suffer and possibly die for your faith in Jesus. Jesus tells you, in no uncertain terms, that if you live the way he has called you to live, you will bring an added layer of suffering on yourself in this world... does that promise of suffering because you are a Christian ring any bells?

When I look around at our world right now, when I turn on the radio and listen to the current political climate of our country, when I open up the USA Today app at home and read the stories and issues that pass as news today (like this last week, which bathrooms should boys and girls be allowed to enter), I am concerned. Without getting into needless worrying or pointless speculation about what exactly tomorrow may bring, I also would be naïve to ignore the reality that the world I am currently serving as a pastor, the world my children will grow up in, is significantly less Bible-clinging-Christian friendly than a generation ago. This idea of dying for my faith doesn't seem to be quite as inconceivable as it once did in this country.

“In this world you will have trouble...” the promise of God for us through this vision he showed John.

How's that for a little pick-me-up this morning? And I bet some of you came to church this morning hoping pastor was going to make you feel better about your life, feel better about the suffering you go through each and every day. And yet here we sit dwelling on that crystal clear promise of God: **In this world you will have trouble.**

But it is here friends, right here, after dwelling on the first half of God's promise to us that we hear that beautiful phrase, “after this...”

“After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: ‘Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the lamb.’...”

“Then one of the elders asked me, ‘These in white robes – who are they, and where did they come from?’

“I answered, ‘Sir, you know.’

“And he said, “These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; (and I'd make one little change to the translation here, the Greek says, “who are coming out of the great tribulation” – not past tense, this is present, it's happening right now), **they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the**

Lamb. Therefore, they are before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will spread his tent over them. Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat upon them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.’”

Earlier I said that we can't fully appreciate this section of Revelation 7 if we don't first answer the question, “after what?” Do you understand now why I would say that? In order to fully appreciate the second half of Jesus' promise to us in the Bible, and in these visions in Revelation, we have to understand the first half.

Jesus does not promise you that if you just pray hard enough, work hard enough, believe sincerely enough that your life in this world will get better and better – that nothing will stop your rise to power and success if you only have enough faith and give enough offerings. Jesus doesn't promise you that, in fact he promises you the exact opposite: “**In this world you will have trouble, BUT, but take heart, I have overcome the world.**”

Friends today we are celebrating Good Shepherd Sunday – the beautiful picture that we are sheep and we have a shepherd whose name is Jesus. The beautiful truth that we have a Shepherd who loves his sheep so much that he would take the worst suffering this world has to offer on his shoulders, that he would die to overcome the world and its suffering, that he would come back to life so he could shepherd us from this world to our real home before the throne of God.

Today God would have us dwell on the two parts of his promise for us so that we are not surprised or caught off guard when the crud of this world hurts us, but God would never have us forget there is always an “after this.” Just as surely as his promise that we will suffer in this world is coming true, so his promise that he has overcome this world is true.

In this world you will have trouble, but after this, when you have come out of the great tribulation, never again will you hunger, never again will you thirst, never again will the sun beat on your shoulders, your Shepherd will lead you to springs of living water and God himself will wipe every tear from your eyes.

God grant that this beautiful promise remain in our hearts and minds until we too leave the great tribulation and stand forever, with our Shepherd, before the throne of God.

Amen.