

Heaven's Coming; or, When the Saints Come (Not Go) Marching In

Rev 7:9-12

Today is All-Saints Sunday, and the title of the sermon is, "Heaven's Coming; Or When the Saints Come (Not Go) Marching In!"

We have called the names of our saints today, and they are with us in a deeply spiritual way.

The creeds talk about "the communion of saints", and this means for me the communion of the living and those in heaven. Some moments the veil between us and those who have gone before us into the world to come becomes very thin. In a movie, *Tender Mercies*, there is a scene where the small Texas church is celebrating the Lord's Supper and suddenly we see those who have died sitting beside their spouses and children and friends. Today is that kind of day.

Carlyle Marney talked about our "balcony people", those who cheer us on through our lives. "We are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses", the writer of Hebrews says. We have an uncountable many who are in the balcony of heaven cheering us on.

In our text from Revelation today John is given a vision of heaven. It is a glorious sight. People too many to count, from every nation, tribe and tongue are gathered around the throne of God praising God and Christ. Some people get hung up on the *census* of heaven—how many and who’s in and who’s out? Some get hung up on the *geography* of heaven—where is it? Streets of gold? Angels with harps? Some get hung up on the *chronology* of heaven—when is it going to happen?

But I think that part of the meaning of this vision is that it is a vision of heaven’s coming to us! Now. What we see in the vision is God’s dream for us today.

I think Jesus would agree. When he talked about the kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven, it was more than a place we were trying to get into at the end of life. He was talking about heaven’s coming to us. To us and all the world.

In John’s vision, the Beloved Community of God has no set number, no requirements of color, or tongue or earthly status. It is not a gated community. Some might not like this vision: “Too inclusive!” But they are invited too—and will like it better than they think.

But the vision is also about heaven’s coming now to our world too, to us.

The song “When the Saints Go Marching In” is a joyous funeral song played by dixie-land bands in New Orleans as the body of the deceased is carried down the streets for burial. Along with the sorrow, there ought to be some joy when we lift our loved ones into the arms of God.

But today I’m talking about the saints who *come* marching in, those who have cheered us on through our lives, some now gone before us into heaven but others who may be sitting in church with us today.

Who are those in your life who have loved you, encouraged you, cheered you on? For some of us, our parents come to mind. Can you remember the moments they encouraged you and cheered you on? Can you remember their words, the sound of their voices?

I remember my dad today, who died at the age of 73 in 1998. He was a minister of music, and I sang in his choirs from elementary school until I left for college. He taught me to sing the faith long before I had to profess it. Faith at its deepest level is more a song to be sung than a document to be signed. Singing the faith in anthems and hymns saved me from the biblical literalism of my religious tribe. The words pointed beyond themselves to the ineffable and were carried to God on the wings of the song.

He also took me to play golf with him from my teenage years on. When I hit a good shot, he would praise it as if I'd hit a perfect five iron onto the 18th green of the Master's tournament to seal the victory. Some moments I can almost hear him cheering me on today.

My mother turned 97 in September. Guess what I did on her 97th birthday? I took her to get a new pair of glasses! That's a story! She was a first-grade teacher and taught me to read and to love books in my early years. Her good grammar rubbed off on me. She still cheers me on when I go to visit her.

I think of my high school English teacher and debate coach, Mrs. Potter, who was the first to plant the question: "Have you ever thought about being a minister?" I think of my teachers in college and seminary who encouraged me in my studies and vocation.

I hope you are calling to mind people in our own lives. A parent, a coach, a teacher, a friend who has encouraged you at every point in your life.

Last Sunday at Scary Supper we cheered on our children as they dressed up and presented a play. I think we remember those moments when we have been applauded all our lives.

There are people in your life who have believed in you. You remember them. They have made a difference. We all need people who believe in us.

But what about us, we who were cheering on our children? Didn't it feel good to applaud them? *Giving applause* is also a part of the way we experience the goodness of God. It brings joy to our hearts.

So, when the saints come marching in! *You can be among that number!* You can be part of the balcony of heaven today! We cheer each other on. We cheer others on. I see you doing it every week.

III

What about the saints of our church? The ones whose names we have called today. What about the saints sitting in church with us today?

This summer we talked a lot about our church, and name after name was called of those who had touched our lives and made our church better. There are many hidden saints too, not recognized, not known. Anonymous saints. They've helped us along and made us a better people too.

I love the verse in the new All Saints hymn that goes:

Rejoice in God's saints
unpraised and unknown
who bear someone's cross
or shoulder their own.

We remember them too. I learned this week that All Saints Day began as a way of honoring not only the official saints of the church but the unknown ones too! *All Saints Day*.

I've said before that the word "saint" in the New Testament is never in the singular, always in the plural, "saints." We are the company of saints, all of us with our own foibles and each of us with a gift to offer the church, sometimes given quietly with no attention at all.

IV

Through the centuries the Roman Catholic Church has created a calendar of saints who are celebrated year-round. These are they who have made the love of God so transparent in their lives that they cause us to love God all the more. Some are in stained-glass windows; others are emblems in our hearts.

There's a French saint of the church named St. Roche. I learned of him recently. He cared for victims of the plague. Once his leg was badly injured, and as the story goes, a dog came and licked his wounds and his leg was healed. He is often pictured in art with raggedy clothes and an injured leg with a dog beside him. He is called the patron saint of dogs, the sick, the falsely accused and bachelors!

Some of our saints are religious, some would never claim to be religious. There are secular saints too. Who are some of yours? Florence Nightingale, Eleanor Roosevelt? Martin Luther King? Dorothy Day, who spent her life ministering to the poor? Some promoted the idea that she be made a saint, but she said no because she didn't want to be so easily dismissed. What about Susan B. Anthony, who led the suffragette movement for women's right to vote? In 1920, about 50 years after she began, it was accomplished.

Ghandhi? One of mine is Rabbi Abraham Heschel who taught at the Jewish Theological Seminary across the street from Union Seminary where I went to school. He left his classes to go march side by side with Martin Luther King. He was criticized for leaving his prayers and his students. He replied, "My legs were praying." Some of our saints pray not with their lips but with their legs. Who would you put on your list today?

There was a Peace Corps commercial whose last line was: "The Peace Corps: A way to say 'I love you' without getting caught!" Some of our saints want to say "I love you" without getting caught.

V

But there's one more thing I hope for today, and it has to do with the applause of heaven. I hope you hear *God* cheering you on today.

Jesus' beatitudes are his way of cheering us on.

Blessed are you who feel poor in spirit today; the kingdom of heaven belongs to you.

Blessed are you who care enough about others to mourn.

Blessed are the gentle ones; they help the earth endure.

Cheers to the peacemakers! They are the daughters and sons of God.

Blessed are the compassionate ones through whom mercy flows.

And a big cheer for those who hunger and thirst for justice and righteousness, who hunger and thirst for it in themselves and for others!

Jesus cheers us on. This is his roll-call of saints.

I think if you slow down and listen quietly you can hear God's applause for you, God's encouragement and love.

"Well done, good and faithful servant: Enter now into the joy of God."

"I know how hard it was for you to even get out of bed today. But you did, and I'm proud of you."

"You've been taking care of my little ones all your life. Thank you."

"I saw what you did for that person. No one noticed, but I did."

“You are going to get slammed for the stand you took today. I’ve got your back.”

“You slipped up badly, but you’ve learned, and you’ve gotten up and gone on. Good for you.”

“Sweet cakes, I know how hard things have been, but look how brave you are! You showed up. I’m with you hon.” (That’s God disguised as a Southern waitress)

So, the next time you hear a dixie-land band playing, “When the Saints Go Marching In”, sing along this way:

O when the saints,

O when the saints,

O when the saints come marching in.

Lord, I want to be in that number,

When the saints *come* marching in!