

“WHAT WE WILL BE HAS NOT YET BEEN REVEALED”

Revelation 7:9-17; 1 John 3:1-3

A Sermon by John Thomason

Woodbury UMC

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As you know, “kids say the darndest things,” and they also ask the profoundest questions. One day, completely out of the blue, my four-year old grandson Allen asked me, “Can I see people who are dead?” I gulped hard, realizing that, even at such a young age, Allen is beginning to comprehend the reality of death. No doubt he has heard his parents referring to their grandparents who are no longer alive, and Allen naturally wonders what these distant relatives look like. I replied that one of the sad things about people dying is that we can no longer see them in person. The best we can do is to remember them by looking at photographs, and I promised to show him pictures of my father who died twelve years ago – the great-grandfather whom Allen will never meet in this life.

“Can I see people who are dead?” Allen’s question may sound childlike and naïve, but even as adults we all ask this question in one way or another. We yearn to catch a glimpse of the communion of the saints in heaven. We wonder in what form they live on in the presence of God. We even wonder if they can look down on us from their celestial balcony and have influence on us in our joys and struggles here on earth.

The Bible gives us hints of what people look like and what they’re doing in the hereafter, but they are only hints. The writer of Hebrews assures us that “we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses” (Hebrews 12:1), a heavenly throng who cheers us on in our own race of faith. The apostle Paul affirms that when we die, we will exchange our worn-out physical bodies for “spiritual bodies” that are permanent and purified of their imperfections (1 Corinthians 15:44). In today’s first reading from Revelation, the apostle John pictures the departed saints, who have been through “the great ordeal” of persecution, now standing before the throne of God, dressed in white robes, waving palm branches, and singing praises to the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ (Revelation 7:9-17).

Again, these are hints about what the dead look like when they are alive again in the presence of their Maker; but they are only hints, images, metaphors. The more honest and truthful projection is contained in today’s Epistle lesson from 1 John: “Beloved, we are God’s children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed” (1 John 3:2a). That’s the wonder and the agony of it: we have the promise that those who are dead in Christ are alive again, but we cannot see them and know for certain what they look like.

For the first time in several years, All Saints Day actually falls on a Sunday, which seems especially fitting in this crazy year of 2020. Today we feel a sense of separation from saints who are living as well as saints who are dead. We haven’t seen some of our church friends in-person for over seven months, and we’re wondering how their appearance has changed. Are they showing signs of wear and tear from the pandemic? Is their hair longer or greyer? Have they grown taller or heavier? And when will we ever find out? Can we again see people whom we have not seen in a month of Sundays; and assuming we can see them someday, what will they look like? “What we will be has not yet been revealed.”

Again, that's the wonder and agony of this All Saints Day: we cannot see what the dead look like; we cannot even see what some of the living look like; and we cannot peer into the future to know what any of us will look like five years from now or five hundred years from now. "What we will be has not yet been revealed."

This mystery perplexes us, not only as individuals, but also as a Church. Many congregations were already facing a clouded future before the global pandemic hit; but COVID-19 has brought changes that leave all faith communities in a state of heightened uncertainty. When and how will this end? What will the Church look like on the other side of this crisis? Will the Church still be viable as an institution? Will our people continue to support the Church financially? Will members who have drifted away come back? Will we be a robust community again and be able to do ministry on anything like the scale to which we were accustomed? And then a huge question we may have forgotten about: when the pandemic is finally behind us, how will the UMC's General Conference deal with its unfinished business with the LGBTQ community? Will the United Methodist Church remain united or be torn asunder?

The actor Ethan Hawke was recently asked what he had learned from the COVID-19 pandemic. He replied that he keeps thinking about the biblical story of Jonah and the whale. He said, "We've kind of been swallowed by the whale and we're not exactly sure where we're going to be spit out." This is a perfect description of where we are as faith communities approaching the end of 2020. What the Church will be has not yet been revealed.

I mentioned last Sunday that I've been participating in webinars designed to help church leaders navigate this uncharted terrain. One webinar had to do with the current crisis in race relations. The other addressed the crisis created by the spread of the Coronavirus. This second webinar was entitled, "Doing Church in the Pandemic: Survive and Thrive." The speaker was a church consultant named Bill Wilson, who happens to be a Baptist, but who works with congregations from a variety of faith traditions.

The title of the webinar says it all: the challenge facing churches today is two-fold – to survive and to thrive. First, there is the matter of sheer survival. Bill Wilson says that for churches just to remain alive and functioning, we must avoid the trap of extreme thinking. For example, we must avoid the temptation to "awfulize" – to be immobilized by the fear of declining and dying as a church; but we must also avoid the temptation to "minimize" – to view the pandemic as a passing event and trust that the church will simply go back to the old normal when this is all over. We must avoid the temptation to "spiritualize" – you know, just have faith in God to preserve us as individuals and congregations; but we must also avoid the temptation to "secularize" – just follow the politicians or the scientists and we will all live happily ever after. We must avoid the temptation to be totally "open" – with unrestricted personal contact and no boundaries in corporate worship; but we must also avoid the temptation to be totally "closed" – shutting down our churches and denying people the ability to remain in fellowship. If the Church is to survive the pandemic, we must move from either/or thinking to both/and thinking. One concrete example of this is to offer worship services that are both in-person and virtual, which our church has been doing since mid-July.

If the Church is to survive, we must also deal with our growing fatigue: physical fatigue, spiritual fatigue, emotional fatigue, and what Bill Wilson calls "decision fatigue" – the weariness that comes when we are forced to make one difficult choice after another. Do we risk going out,

or do we remain sequestered at home? Do we provide education in classrooms, or virtual-only, or do we use a hybrid model? Do we get together with extended family for Thanksgiving and Christmas, or do we stay in our own homes? Do we provide gathered activities as a church; and if so, how can we do it safely? How can we make an in-person worship service both secure and welcoming? The decisions we have to make keep coming at us in rapid fire succession, and they wear us out.

If the Church is to survive, we must also re-set our horizons. In the good old days, we did what we called “long-range planning” – setting goals and projecting our church’s future three to five years ahead of time. But today our immediate landscape is changing too fast and has become too foggy for us to set our horizons that far out. Who knows what challenges our church will be facing this Christmas Eve or next Easter Sunday? Who knows when a vaccine will become available and more of our flock will feel comfortable about gathering again? Bill Wilson says that congregations are now wise to make plans that extend only 10, 30, or 60 days out. We will have to learn to be flexible, to recalibrate our plans repeatedly as circumstances change. What happened here today is a case in point: we had planned to livestream this service, but at the last minute a technical glitch required us to record it instead for later broadcast. To survive, we must be like the character in the nursery rhyme: “Jack be nimble, Jack be quick.”

However, Bill Wilson says that it is not enough for churches merely to survive these uncertain times; we must also find ways to thrive. And we will thrive if we give ourselves permission to be innovative and creative. We must abandon the old excuse, “we’ve never done it that way before,” because we’ve never been in a situation like this one before. We must enlist and encourage people who think outside the box, including young people who are tech-savvy and artistic, and people of all ages who can inject hope and joy where there is despair and fear.

Bill Wilson says that for churches to thrive in these uncertain times, above all we must re-center our focus. We must move from being building-centric to being mission-centric. We must not conclude that because little is happening under our steeple, that little ministry is being offered to our congregation and community. Our mission extends beyond these four walls, so it can be vibrant and effective even when we are not together. The church is not just a private club to which people belong and occasionally attend. John Wesley’s vision of the church’s mission field has never been more true: “the world is our parish.”

Because this is so, we must also move from being program-centric to being people-centric and community-centric. For the time being, we are not able to provide Sunday School classes, graded choirs, and pasta dinners inside our building; but we can meet the people in our congregation and community where they are and meet their needs in other ways.

Bill Wilson sums it up this way: in order to thrive, we as the Church must re-balance our internal/external portfolio. The pandemic era is a good time to ask, how much money in our church budget goes to maintain our in-house operations, and how much is directed outside the family of faith? Do we ask our volunteers just to keep the home fires burning, or do we turn them loose to set the world on fire with the love of Christ? Yes, this is an uncomfortable, even perilous time, but it is prime time to recover our missional focus. The question is not just what or how much we are doing, but why are we doing it. What are we here for? What is the true vocation of the Woodbury United Methodist Church? When we can’t do everything we customarily do or want to do, what is God calling us to do?

The writer of 1 John states the obvious: “What we will be has not yet been revealed.” But in the midst of this uncertainty, John provides words of assurance: “See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are” (1 John 3:1a) . . . “Beloved, we are God’s children now” (v. 2a). Not in some idealized future, but now – in the midst of a global pandemic and a bitter presidential election; now, in the midst of racial strife and economic recession; now, when churches everywhere are struggling just to keep their doors open – we are beloved children of God.

And then this further assurance: “when [Christ] is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is” (v. 2b). The mystery of our future will not be revealed when we solve all our problems here on earth or “when we all get to heaven.” We will realize our future when he is revealed. It’s primarily about him, not about us! When we see Jesus, “we will be like him,” just as he became like us in the Incarnation. We won’t be able to take our eyes off him, and we will come to resemble him. He will be our vision, our heart, our total reality; and like the saints who have gone before us, we will be “lost in wonder, love, and praise.”

In the meantime, in these uncertain times, we have an earthly calling to fulfill. We are not flailing about in the darkness, without an identity or a purpose. We are God’s children now, and by the grace of God, we will survive and thrive.