



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School
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All Saints Day

November 3, 2013

“And God Will Wipe Away Every Tear”

(Rev. 7:14-17)

Rev. David K. Groth

“These are ones out of the great tribulation. 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 shelter them with his presence. They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes’” (Rev. 7:14-17).

Collect of the Day

Almighty and everlasting God, You knot together Your faithful people of all times and places into one holy communion, the mystical body of Your Son, Jesus Christ. Grant us so to follow Your blessed saints in all virtuous and godly living that, together with them, we may come to the unspeakable joys You have prepared for those who love You; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Amen

Recently there was an article in the Wall Street Journal about the Chinese custom of burning stacks of so called “ghost money”. It’s for their ancestors to help ensure their comfort in the afterlife. The idea is that by burning this fake money your dead ancestors get to spend that money in the underworld. But you need to burn enough so they can buy everything they might need in the afterlife. It’s a sort of offering to them, and for many it’s a vital part of taking care of your dead ancestors.

The fake paper money looks a bit like monopoly money and can be used for groceries and clothing purchases in the underworld, but paper credit cards are sold too, even paper iPads, paper flat-screen TVs and paper cars too. The traditional view of the Chinese afterlife is that it closely mirrors the real world. For example it has its own government, full of politicians and officials, some of which are corrupt. And so your ancestors also need a little extra cash with which to bribe them, and cash for cigarettes and gambling as well (“*In Hong Kong, Inflation Fears Spook the Spirit World*”, Aug. 19, 2013).

I don’t know about you, but that sort of afterlife doesn’t sound like any fun at all. What if your children and grandchildren neglect their duties and leave you penniless down there in the underworld? What if they themselves have little money for food, clothing and shelter? You are at their mercy, but they may not even know you, much less have the

time, money or inclination to worry about your afterlife. And that, chain smoking, dirty politician down there? He doesn't care about all that; he just wants to see you make a deposit into his slush fund. And what if you don't like second-hand smoke? Again, that sort of afterlife doesn't sound like any fun at all.

Compare that with our text from Revelation. "These are they who have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb . . . Therefore they are before the throne of God . . . They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes." That is, all our needs will be met in heaven. Toil and anxieties will be things of the past. No more crying or pain. No burning hunger or oppressive heat or killing frost. No need for cash to buy cigarettes or as a sweetener for the corrupt official.

In the Bible, human language cannot bear the freight of what heaven is. Therefore the Bible often speaks of what heaven is not. And if I were to summarize, the Bible says heaven is not a place where there is any kind of suffering. Revelation 21:4 "...death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away."

Those former things date back to the day when Adam and Eve rebelled against God. God responded in part by making pregnancy and childbearing painful for women, even excruciating. He also cursed the ground. "Through painful toil" he told Adam, "you will eat of it all the days of your life" he said. "It will produce thorns and thistles for you . . . by the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground" (Gen. 3). Through man's sin the world was opened up to immeasurable suffering, not just for Adam and Eve but their descendents including you and me, "for all have

sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). Hunger and thirst, which were easy to satisfy in the Garden before the Fall, became a common source of anguish in a fallen world. The sun, which was created to serve man, became for many a burning source of discomfort. *Everything* was thrown out of whack. It wasn’t just Adam that fell. The whole creation went down with him. At times that fallen creation seems antagonist toward man with floods and fires, blizzards and blights, typhoons and typhoid. With the whole creation being much less hospitable or cooperative, hunger, thirst and shelter, even these lower needs became a common source of suffering. But higher needs also take a hit. The relationships turn sour . . . even making music or art becomes toilsome. Because of sin, everything is more difficult.

All this changes in heaven. Heaven is where everything works the way it should. Therefore, “they shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat.”

That verse makes me think of those 40 years that God’s ancient people spent in the desert. If a desert is anything, it’s a place where food and water is scarce, where the sun and heat team up to make life nearly unbearable, and where the cold at night also takes a swipe at your life. That’s why the people grumbled so; that’s why they wept. Even when they crossed over the Jordan into Canaan, the Promised Land, still the crying didn’t end, because the suffering didn’t end. Compared to the desert, that land flowed with milk and honey. But it was no paradise. They were still fallen people living in a fallen world. Therefore, there were and are many tears.

“The wages of sin is death” Paul writes (Rom. 6:23), and wherever there is death, tears are nearby. So King David grieved over the death of Absalom and would not be comforted (2 Sam.18:33-19:4). Rachel wept over her children (Jer. 31:15). Mary shed tears at the death of Lazarus (Jn. 11:33), but so did Jesus (v. 35). The women of Jerusalem wept over Jesus as he dragged his cross

through the streets (Lk. 23:26-27), but Jesus urged them to weep for themselves instead and for their children because of the coming afflictions (28-31).

We also shed tears when confronted with God's anger. Psalm 80: "You have fed them with the bread of tears and given them tears to drink in full measure" (v. 5). We weep when deeply disappointed. Paul wept tears over the Christians of Corinth (2 Cor. 2:4). We weep when feeling lonely. Timothy wept when Paul departed (2 Tim. 1:4). We weep when we feel sorry for others. Jesus wept tears over Jerusalem (Lk. 19:41). We weep when we feel guilty. After hearing the sound of the rooster crowing, Peter wept bitter tears (Lk. 22:62).

The shedding of tears is very much a part of this life, even the Christian life. For some Christians (I'm thinking of those persecuted for the faith) it may seem that the faith has brought them nothing but trouble and hardship.

Even in comfy little Watertown, there are a lot of tears, because there's a lot of suffering. Buckets full have been shed over at the hospital and at the funeral homes and at the cemetery across the street. My guess is every room in this city has seen tears, and most cars too. The possibilities for suffering in this fallen world are nearly limitless.

In his book "The Red Horse" Eugenio Corti recalls in part his experiences as an Italian soldier during World War II serving on the Russian front. The front was swiftly moving back and forth, civilians were caught up in between, homes pillaged, fields plundered, whole towns leveled, if not by the Germans and Italians then by the Russians. Women and children victimized, men maimed, killed, ruined. It was an era of unmitigated suffering. Of the Russian civilians caught up in the destruction Corti said, "these people know no end of suffering."

We can always point to those who have it worse than we do, and I suppose there's some comfort in

that . . . but not much. The real comfort comes in knowing that for Christians, there will come an end to suffering. There is light at the end of the tunnel. I'm not talking about euthanasia; that's the world's view of relief from suffering. I'm talking about that time when the Lord will finally bring us home. The promise of this text is that in heaven, all the suffering, of every sort, ends . . . forever. In heaven, God will wipe away all the tears by wiping away all the reasons for the tears.

Sometimes when we think of dear ones who have died, we think of them as we last knew them . . . gasping at the oxygen mask . . . hobbling about with a walker, perhaps depressed, lonely. Our challenge is to remember that by grace through faith, they are with the Lord. They are no longer suffering. God has wiped away every tear from their eyes. We need not grieve *for them* anymore. We can feel sorry for ourselves, but they're in a good place, and our challenge is to remember that. They're in a joyous place where there are no tears.

How is it that they got there? "Who are these, clothed in white robes?" asked John. And he said to me, "These are the ones . . . who have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb." That is, they're not in heaven by their own merits. They got there by the blood of the Lamb. These are the ones forgiven all their sin. That's what makes them saints, not their holy living, but God's holy cleansing. Not because they were so innocent, but because God was so merciful. We call them saints not because of all their good works or by what they gave to the world, but because of what God gave to them: name his Son Jesus to suffer for them so they don't have to suffer for themselves.

What God did for them, he has done for you. In Holy Baptism your robes have been made white in the blood of the Lamb. In the Lord's Supper, you have been cleansed of sin. God has given his righteousness to you. So thorough is that cleansing, so thorough that

forgiveness, that when God looks at you, he doesn't see a sinner anymore. He only sees one of his own, a saint, whose robes have been made white in the blood of the Lamb.

A day is soon coming then, when God will turn your sorrow into joy (Ps. 126:5) and your mourning into dancing (Ps. 30:11). A day soon comes when God will wipe away every residual tear from your eyes.
Amen.

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