

The great multitude (Revelation 7:9-17)

As theophanies go, this one is oddly comforting.

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May 10, 2019

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Whenever I read Revelation 7—with its vision of the great multitude from every nation, white-robed and standing before the throne—I think of my friend Judy. I remember sitting one morning in a coffeeshop with Judy and a few other pastors. It was early in the week, and we were preparing for our Sunday sermons. We were all tired of preaching about shepherds and sheep, so we focused our conversation on John's eschatological vision.

As theophanies go, we decided, this one is oddly comforting. (Especially if you don't look at the verses that come before and after it.) John envisions a diverse, teeming multitude of God's children gathering in awe at the foot of the lamb's throne. There's no more hunger or thirst, no more tears or death. No disease. No war. No poverty. Nothing but everlasting joy as the great cloud of witnesses finally stands face to face with God.

As we drank our coffee and talked about the white-robed multitude, one pastor pulled out a [book](#) and passed it around. We admired the picture on its cover, a painting by [John August Swanson](#). The know-it-all in the group pointed out that the people in the multitude aren't exactly white-robed. "But the people are so illuminated by the candles that it almost looks like their garments are white," Judy replied, ever the optimist. "Especially if you squint." We looked again at the painting and decided that squinting was good enough.

Then we looked at verse 13: “Who are these, robed in white, and where do they come from?” John doesn’t know, and the answer from the elder is vague: “These are they who have come out of the great ordeal.” What does that mean? *Thlipsis*, the Greek word for *ordeal*, can also be translated as *tribulation*. In John’s time, the worst tribulations were experienced by those who resisted the Roman empire. He was writing to people who were being persecuted—and even martyred—for holding onto their faith.

We decided that there were tribulations in our own time too. President Bush had recently implemented a “surge” of U.S. troops in Iraq. The devastation wrought by Hurricane Katrina was fresh in our minds. One of the youngest pastors had recently lost his wife to brain cancer. We’d all been through ordeals, some more painful than others. We also all knew that we were responsible for some of the tribulations suffered by other people in our world. We may not be the Roman empire, but neither are we the seven persecuted churches.

Then Judy began talking about her favorite [Flannery O’Connor](#) story, “Revelation.” The story ends at sunset with the protagonist—a spiteful, judgmental woman named Mrs. Turpin—envisioning a great horde of people tumbling toward heaven. The first people she sees in the crowd are the very people she’s spent the day despising, black people and poor people and uneducated people, “battalions of freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs.”

What’s really great about the story, Judy said, is that these people are at the beginning of the line. All of the people who consider themselves respectable and dignified—those with money and education and privilege, like Mrs. Turpin—are marching at the end of the line. They’re the *last* to get into heaven.

But what matters in the end, continued Judy, is that everyone is in line. *Everyone*. Poor and rich, white and black, old and young, judgmental and judged. As they march their way to heaven, Mrs. Turpin hears “the voices of the souls climbing upward into the starry field and shouting hallelujah.”

That hallelujah belongs to everyone, said Judy. And it’s a good thing, she added, because we’re probably not the ones at the beginning of the line. We’re more likely bringing up the rear, marching along right next to Mrs. Turpin.

We all sat in silence for a moment, stunned by how Judy had summarized Mrs. Turpin’s vision and our place in it. We realized that our moments of deepest

revelation may be tinged with the most paradoxical form of beauty, the painful and lovely sense of gratitude that hits us when we realize two things: God's grace is far more expansive than we would ever wish it to be, and it's only because of that surplus that we too are among the saved.