

Once upon a time there was a man named John. He was an old man and a man who had seen greatness in his time. But he was also a man who had experienced great sorrow and suffering. Even at this point in his life he was incarcerated on an island called Patmos in the Mediterranean, an ancient Alcatraz where criminals and political prisoners were held by the Roman Empire. For all of its greatness, Rome *was* ruthlessly cruel. The emperor was seen as a god and worshipped as such. He was a god who focused on the subjugation and domination of diverse peoples and diverse lands. This empire was like a beast that tore through ancient Europe and ravaged all in its path. Its religion was violence and its doctrine was terror. And anyone who challenged this religion was challenging the god of the religion - Caesar.

John was such a person who challenged this religion and this god. And for all of this he was exiled to the island of Patmos.

Well, one day John was sitting on a rock looking out over the vast Mediterranean Sea. He was thinking, perhaps praying, perhaps wondering if he would ever get off this island.

“Dear God,” he thought, “Is this how I will die? On this island alone?”

Just then, in a moment John looked into heaven and saw an open door. And through this door came a voice like the sound of a trumpet saying, “John, come up here and I will reveal to you what must happen.”

From that moment on, John was no longer on an island in the Mediterranean, he was somewhere else -

In a distant land.

In a distant space.

In another world.

When I was a child I was constantly being encouraged to read the Bible. Every day. Genesis, Exodus, Psalm, Matthew, Mark, Romans. But if there was one book that I avoided reading it was Revelation. At that time I don't think that I had ever read or seen anything as terrifying as this book of the Bible. It's a book that's filled with war and violence and dripping blood and horrifying creatures and dragons and bottomless pits and smoke and fire! I just didn't have the categories to understand what I was reading.

But as I was reading Revelation this week I found myself almost taken up *with* John into this other world. I found myself captured by the images that once terrified me. I found myself enthralled with its fantasy. I found this book as captivating as any book in Scripture.

When John arrives in this other world he begins to see many things. There is a book with seven seals - there are seven trumpets - there are seven bowls. With each of these things comes a revelation, like a dream within a dream. However, in our text today - Revelation chapter 7 - John is taking a moment, a break, a breath to describe what he sees in this distant land. And this is what he says,

“After this I looked and saw a group of people that no one could count. They were from every nation and all tribes and people groups and languages and they were standing around a throne and before the Lamb and they were robed in white waving palm branches and singing a song. There were angels standing around the throne and old men and creatures falling on their faces singing the same song: ‘Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever!’”

John is perplexed by all of this until one of the old men comes up to him and tells him, “John, these people who are wearing white robes, the ones standing around the throne singing, they are the ones who have come out of great sorrow and out of great suffering who have made their robes white in the blood of the Lamb. And John, they never stop singing.”

John asked, “Why don’t they stop?”

The old man responded, “Because God shelters them. They never go hungry. They never thirst. The sun doesn’t burn them. And they never cry; John, he’s wiped away all of their tears.”

There was once a time when I cried.

When I cried a lot.

It was a time in my life when I felt isolated. When I felt intense pains of loneliness. Like being on an island looking out over the vast waters of uncertainty. “Is this how I will die?” I asked myself. “Alone?”

And this is a question that confronts me periodically in my life. The question of isolation and loneliness and ultimately death. “Am I alone?”

It’s one of the most common cries from a suffering humanity, “Am I alone?” Looking desperately around every bend for someone to hear us. Looking high and low. “Do you see my tears?” we ask, “Do you see my sorrow? Do you see my suffering?” We desperately want to be seen. We desperately want to be known. We desperately want to know that we’re *not* alone.

I think that it is here that we find something of the meaning of Revelation. In a world desolated by war and ravaged by violence. Suffering people cried out. They cried out with words, “Am I alone?” So God opens a door to heaven and beckons a man to

enter because through this door he will reveal what must happen. Through this door John sees another world where people from every nation, tribe, people group, and language stand around the throne of God and sing a song of hope. In a world where the greatest fear is isolation and loneliness and death we get a glimpse into another world where there is an unending song being sung *because* there is an unending life. In this other world people who once lived alone now are surrounded by others. People who once lived homeless now have shelter. People who once were hungry now are fed. People who once were thirsty are now given something to drink. People who once cried, now have no more tears.

John had stepped through a portal into another world. A timeless world where God's people sing a forever song of hope. For eternity. Singing.

You see into the distant past there have been people who have lived and died. And before people there were angels and archangels. And before angels and archangels there was Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And there was a song. That song has always been. It's a forever song.

And when there was sorrow in this world. There was a song being sung. And when there was suffering in this life. There was a forever song of hope being sung in heaven.

Now I want us to hear this:

The world that John saw is not a future world. He's not saying, "Stop crying! Because things are going to get better someday!" No, I think that if John were here today he would look deeply into our eyes and know and understand our sorrow and suffering.

The world that John saw is a world that exists even now. There's another world where there is a forever song of hope being sung. *Even now.*

John had stepped through a portal into another world.

Today is the Feast of All Saints. Or we might call it The Feast of The Other World. Because All Saints points to our being called up like John through a portal into another world where God's people are singing a forever song.

Today there are two beautiful people who are sitting on these front rows: Andrew Hodge and Destiny Cisneros. In just a few moments we are going to baptize them. But it's in this moment I realize that we're going to do more than baptize them, we're going to throw them up through a portal

into heaven.

Even now.

Because you see in baptism we are called through a portal into another world where with angels and archangels and with all the company of heaven we sing in endless praise:

Holy, Holy, Holy Lord, God of power and might,
heaven and earth are full of your glory.

Hosanna in the highest.

Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.

Hosanna in the highest.

Through sorrow and suffering.

Through isolation and intense pains of loneliness.

Through tears that never seem to stop.

In this moment

In this place

We listen

We listen for that forever song
of hope.

Even now.