



**“Glimpsing God’s Heavenly Realm”**  
**Scripture – Revelation 21:1-7**  
**Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones**  
**Sunday, November 4, 2018**

If nothing else in my sermon attaches itself to you, I want you to at least walk away with this one tiny shred of biblical knowledge. Today’s Scripture passage does not come from the Book of Revelations. This is the number one mistake people commit when referring to the last book of the Bible. There is no “s” on Revelation. I know, this is a small thing, but I’m sparing you from that embarrassing moment when someone says to you, “Didn’t your pastor ever tell you that?”

You may be embarrassed by other things I have or have not done, but not this one. The precise name of the final book is: “The Revelation to John.” Or, it’s permissible to say, “The Book of Revelation.” **YOU ARE NOW AMONG THE SMALL SELECT GROUP THAT IS IN THE KNOW!**

Thinking of yourself this way – as among the chosen who possess insider’s wisdom – is the first step in understanding The Revelation. For you see, John was writing a document filled with coded language – symbols and images that first century followers of Jesus would likely comprehend, but others would not. Its poetic imagery may sound as if it was written by someone under the influence of a hallucinogenic drug, but don’t be fooled. The author is doing two things. First, he is writing a document that he hopes will slip under the radar of the Roman censors, and second, he is intent on engaging the reader’s imagination. He is trying to communicate images from the visions he experienced to encourage those who are being persecuted to be faithful to the end because a glorious afterlife awaits them.

John was exiled to the island of Patmos courtesy of the Romans. It is a small, arid island in the Aegean Sea, 40 miles west of the coast of Turkey. If you go there today, you can see the cave where John lived. It is a small cave that has been converted to a sanctuary. A few years ago, Camilla and I were there to celebrate the Orthodox Easter, which is one week after our Easter. The services begin shortly before midnight on Saturday night and stretch into the early morning hours of Sunday. It was about 1:30 in the morning when we made our way into the cave. I remember it well, because I left part of my scalp on the low ceiling.

Most scholars believe that John composed The Revelation toward the end of the first century, probably in the nineties during the reign of the Roman Emperor Domitian, who was persecuting Christians.

Today, when we attempt to interpret the book, we must block our tendency toward reading things literally, like the news of the day or an historical account. The book does not present one concrete fact after another, but rather dramatic images, frightening figures and symbolic numbers. It is unlike the other books of the Bible with the exception of the Old Testament book of Daniel.

To understand The Revelation, it's best to approach it as we would a book of poems or Impressionist paintings. We need to turn down the section of our brain that is searching for verifiable information and turn up the section that ignites our imagination. To help us, it is probably best to turn off the lights [lights off!] and add some mysterious music [Paul on organ]. To do it right, I should also walk about swinging a censer with burning incense, filling the sanctuary with fragrant smoke. I decided to hold back on that one.

Today's passage comes near the end of the book, but a quick scan of earlier verses will give you a flavor for it. In the first chapter, John begins to make his initial brush strokes on the canvass. Let your imagination picture what he gleaned from one of the visions he experienced. "I John, who shares with you in Jesus the suffering and the kingdom and the patient endurance, was on the island of Patmos...I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet saying, "Write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches...Then I turned to see whose voice it was and I saw seven golden lampstands, and I saw one like the Son of Man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash across his chest. His head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow; his eyes were like a flame of fire, his feet were like burnished bronze, refined as in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of many waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, and from his mouth came a sharp, two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining with full force."

"When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he placed his right hand on me, saying, 'Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, and the living one. I was dead, and see, I am alive forever and ever.'" (Rev. 1:9-18a.)

At another point, John tells of being in the Spirit and being swept into heaven. He sees a throne and the one seated upon it "looks like jasper and carnelian, and around the throne is a rainbow that looks like an emerald. Around the throne are twenty-four thrones, and seated on the thrones are twenty-four elders." Coming from the throne are flashes of lightning, and rumblings and peals of thunder, and in front of the throne burn seven flaming torches, which are the seven spirits of God; and in front of the throne there is something like a sea of glass, like crystal." Are you picturing all of this?

"Around the throne, and on each side of the throne, are four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind: the first living creature like a lion, the second like an ox, the third with a face like a human face, and the fourth like an eagle." (Rev. 4:3-7)

John envisions the one seated on the throne holding a scroll that has been sealed with seven seals. No one is able to open the scroll until Jesus appears. When he breaks the first seal, a white horse with a rider comes out. When he breaks the second seal, a bright red horse with a rider comes out. With the third, it is a black horse, and with the fourth, a green horse.

In his numerous visions, John sees earthquakes, the sun turning black, the moon becoming like blood, and the stars falling from the sky. He tells of seeing a great multitude of people in heaven, so many that no one could count them all.

Eventually, we reach the 21<sup>st</sup> chapter and today's reading, where John says, "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth," and God dwelling with his people, and God wiping away every tear and death being no more."

Some people have taken the book far too literally in trying to construct a picture of exactly what heaven is like. It is important to keep in mind that the author is attempting to describe the indescribable, to provide a picture of eternity to finite creatures, to provide a glimpse of the purely spiritual realm to creatures whose primary focus is on the material world, so he leaves us with evocative impressions not digital photographs.

His description is not enough to allow us to speak with assurance about heaven. I suspect there will be some surprises.

A clergy friend of mine, Nora Tubbs Tisdale, retired last May after a long, successful ministry which culminated in her being a Professor of Homiletics at Yale Divinity School. She told the story of her “maternal grandfather, a lifelong Presbyterian minister, who died at the ripe old age of 98. There were many things she loved about her grandfather--his integrity, his intellect, his deep faith. But they regularly disagreed on a host of social, political and church issues, including the ordination of women to ministry. Sadly, her beloved grandfather never came to terms with what she did with her life.”

However, the morning he died, happened to be World Communion Sunday. Nora’s husband, also a Presbyterian minister, made her chuckle despite her tears. He said, “Who do you suppose is serving your grandfather communion in heaven this morning? I’ll bet it is some women clergy!”<sup>1</sup>

I suspect we will all be in for a few surprises.

So, on this All Saints Sunday, we remember with gratitude those who touched our lives and nurtured our faith, and who now live eternally with God. On one hand, it is a solemn day because we can no longer hear their unique voice, look into their eyes, or throw our arms around them. We cannot ask them the questions we forgot to ask while they were alive. We cannot tell them what we meant to tell them, but never got around to it. So, there may be some tears.

But mingled with our tears of sorrow are feelings of joy. Joy for the blessing they were to us and for the love we shared. And joy for the hope we have of seeing them again in God’s heavenly realm.

#### NOTE

1. Nora Tubbs Tisdale, “Glimpsing Heaven in Thin Places,” *Day1.org*, November 2, 2008.