

New St. James Presbyterian Church
All Saints Day
November 1, 2020
Rev. Mark McLennan

“THIN PLACES”

Revelation 7:9–17

Psalm 34:1–10, 22

1 John 3:1–3

Matthew 5:1–12

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On the coasts of Scotland and Ireland there are certain sites that the locals call "**thin places**."

Thin places are not so named because the altitude is any higher or the air any thinner there.

Rather, they are called "**thin**" because it is believed that in these places the distance between heaven and earth shrinks, and the veil between the two worlds is so "**thin**" you can actually perceive something of heaven itself.

The ancient Celts--sensing the deep spirituality of these sites--built many of their worship places on them, some still marked today by circles of stone.

Later Christians also built churches and monasteries and cemeteries there.

And people who visit these sites today sometimes say they lose all track of time and space while there, and they know--deep down inside--they are on holy ground.

For in **thin places**, boundaries of time and space fade away.

There is no yesterday, today, or tomorrow--only eternity stretching forth in a timeless continuum.

On a Sunday like this one--a day when many Christian churches around the world are celebrating All Saints Day and All Souls Day--it is good to visit the **thin places**, as we think about our loved ones who now dwell in the world beyond this one.

And what better guide to take us there than the author of the book of **Revelation**?

Tradition, of course, attributes the writing of Revelation to the apostle John who, in his later life, dreamed dreams and saw visions on the Isle of Patmos and recorded them for a church suffering persecution and martyrdom.

But whether this book was actually written by that John, or by another, the author must have been someone who frequented the **thin places** of the ancient world.

For his writings are full of the mystery and wonder that come from glimpsing things too holy to be contained by words.

Such is certainly the case in our scripture reading today from **Revelation 7**, where the author invites us to join in peeking through the gossamer veil and glimpsing something of heaven itself!

The view here is different than in later chapters of this book where we behold a city whose streets are paved with gold, whose walls are made of jasper, and where a river, bright as crystal, flows from the throne of God in its midst.

Here we glimpse not so much the physical attributes of the city, but its heart , its vibrancy, its inner life.

Some people think that we are going to be surprised by the people we meet in heaven, and if John's vision is an accurate one, it will definitely be so.

John begins this chapter (the portion that was not a part of our reading today) by talking about all the people from the twelve tribes of Israel who will be there--some 144,000 of them-- a perfect number symbolizing the 12 tribes of Israel times 12 times 1000.

That's a whole lot of Jews--and it reminds us Christians that, as Paul puts it in Romans, we are the branches who have been grafted onto this tree of faith that extends back far further than we do!

Then John broadens the vision even further, saying that in heaven there will be people gathered from every single nation and tribe and language on earth, all giving praise to the Lamb who sits on the throne.

I'm guessing that included in that crowd, too, are going to be a lot of people who surprise us by their presence there.

My dad was an honest, hardworking tradesman, who held clear and definite views on a lot of things.

We regularly disagreed on a host of social, political, and church issues.

After he died, I missed him, of course – and it made me think a bit about what heaven would be like.

In a mischievous moment, I was thinking it would be a wonderful surprise for him in heaven, if he was served communion by a black lesbian.

If truth be told, we all have our blind spots, our prejudices.

Consequently, I have a feeling that we're all going to be surprised by who is sitting with us at the Kingdom banquet table in heaven.

Surely we will see people there we considered unforgivable, unredeemable.

People against whom we have long held grudges or prejudices.

People from nations we branded with the label "*enemy*" or people we failed to even see in this life because of their poverty, disease, or station in life.

They will all be there.

For no matter how inclusive we think we are in our embrace of others, heaven--according to John's vision--will be much more so.

But inclusivity will not be the only surprise awaiting us in heaven.

I think we're also going to be surprised by what people are DOING in heaven.

When heaven is depicted in romantic art, what we often see are a group of cherubs playing their harps, while people lounge around on clouds of ease, as if on a perpetual vacation.

But when we peer through John's veil, what we see is that heaven is actually a very active place.

What is it people are busy doing?

They are worshiping and serving God and others--doing those very same things that gave them the greatest joy, the greatest meaning, in their life here on earth.

When John looks through the veil what he sees are people of every tongue and tribe and nation gathered around the throne of the Lamb, singing,
"Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and might be to our God forever and ever!"

Heaven is a worshiping kind of place!

If you like singing hymns here on earth, just wait until you get to heaven.

It's going to be one perpetual Hallelujah chorus!

But the Greek word that is used here for "*worship*" can also refer to work, to labor that is performed for wages.

This worship, then, is not the kind that ends in the throne room.

It is the kind that extends into those streets, as the saints of heaven also serve one another as God in Christ has served them.

NORATUBBS TISDALE – professor at Yale

One of the saints I always think of on All Saints Day is Sandy Hammond, a young mother who provided care for our children when they were small.

Sandy had a deep faith and a big heart; and when she died at the age of 39 of breast cancer, it broke our hearts.

Several years later, when one of our children's elementary-aged school friends--a little boy named Travis--suffered a tragic death, our daughter, Leonora, asked me if I thought that Sandy would be there to take care of Travis when he got to heaven.

"Oh, yes, child," I said. "Yes."

For I cannot imagine anything that would give Sandy any greater joy than doing in heaven what she loved most to do on earth--serving God by caring for God's children.

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Finally, I think we're going to be surprised in heaven by the scope of healing we will encounter there.

Many people already think of heaven as a place of personal healing.

What a comfort it is to know that our loved ones, many of whom have suffered great physical or mental or emotional illness in this life, will be completely whole in the life to come.

But when John lifts up the veil and lets us have a glimpse into heaven, we see that the healing that will go on there is far broader than that of our own personal lives and the lives of our loved ones.

For heaven is also a place where

*all the injustices of this world will finally be made right,
where the lowly will be lifted up, the mighty brought low
and where God's vision of a community
of justice and peace and equality will finally hold sway.*

I love the fact that the Gospel lectionary reading assigned for All Saints Day is the Beatitudes in Matthew.

For these words call to mind not only those saints who have suffered physical or emotional illness in this life, but also all the martyrs and saints through the centuries who have suffered great evil or injustice - for righteousness' sake.

Listen again to these words and see what faces come to your mind as you hear them:

*"Blessed are the poor in spirit,
"Blessed are those who mourn,
"Blessed are the meek,
"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
"Blessed are the merciful,
"Blessed are the pure in heart,
"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God."
"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake,*

The healing that goes on in heaven will be a healing not only of body, mind, and spirit, but a healing of the entire social order,

- as the Lamb who is seated upon the throne takes on the role of gentle shepherd,
- leading his beloved sheep to springs of water where God wipes away every tear from their eyes.

I wonder: *do you have any **thin places** in your own life?*

Places where the veil between heaven and earth seems gossamer thin, places where you have the sure sense that you are standing on holy ground, communing with the saints who have gone before you?

For me:

Terry Fox Monument

St. Joseph's Oratory

This Sanctuary

But I also find that you don't have to travel far to find such **thin places**.

Indeed, there are times in worship itself when I feel like I am standing on holy ground, and the veil between heaven and earth grows strangely thin.

Christmas Eve

Maundy Thursday

Good Friday

Easter Day

Today is a day for the **thin places**.

So wherever you are, whatever you are doing, take off your shoes.

For the ground upon which you are standing may well be **holy**.

If you open yourself to the Spirit

--the same Spirit who allowed John a glimpse into heaven itself—

you may find yourself transported to a place where:

the boundaries between this world and the world to come fade away,

and where you sense your unity not only with God,

but with all the saints who dwell with God in glory.

IN THE NAME OF THE CREATOR, CHRIST, AND SPIRIT...AMEN

CALL TO WORSHIP (inspired by Matthew 11:29 and Revelation 21:5)

Come all who are weary of wealth, of poverty, of power, of struggle, of division

Come all who are heavy-laden with too much, with too little, with anxiety, with fear, with anger

Come all who have hope for liberation, for peace, for freedom, for the kingdom

Hear these words *“See, I am making all things new.”*

APPROACH

Creator, Christ, and Spirit: God of life and blessing, you created all that exists.

In Christ, you offer your redeeming love to every soul in every situation.

So it is our greatest joy to be united by your Spirit in the community of your people, stretching throughout the generations, all around the world you love.

We join our thanks and praise to the voices of all your saints, both in heaven and on earth, who worship and adore you, saying:

All blessing and glory; all wisdom and thanksgiving;

all honour and power belong to you, O God, this day and forever and ever!

It is not because we fear you, O God, but because we love you and trust in your loving kindness, that we confess our sins together:

God of courage and commitment,

We confess that we have not followed the path you set before us.

Discomfort and fear hold us back from fully embracing your gift of new life.

Our anxieties prevent us from bearing witness to your love.

Forgive us, O God. Give us courage that we may be your saints in our own time, faithfully following Jesus, no matter the cost. AMEN

Assurance of Pardon

When we seek God, we are found;

when we cry out, we are heard;

when we confess, we are forgiven and made new.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

Living God, in whom there is no shadow or change, we thank you for the gift of life eternal, and for all those who having served you well, now rest from their labours.

We thank you for all the saints remembered and forgotten, for those dear souls most precious to us. Today we give thanks for those who during the last twelve months have died and entered into glory.

We bless you for their life and love, and rejoice for them *“all is well, and all manner of things will be well.”*

God of Jesus and our God, mindful of all those choice souls who have gone on ahead of us, teach us, and each twenty-first century disciple of every race and place, to follow their example to the best of our ability:

to feed the poor in body or spirit, to support and comfort the mourners and the repentant, to encourage the meek and stand with them in crises, to affirm those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, to cherish and learn from the merciful, to be humbled by, and stand with, the peacemakers.

Let us clearly recognise what it means to be called the children of God, and to know we are to be your saints neither by our own inclination nor in our own strength but simply by the call and the healing holiness of Christ Jesus our Saviour.

PRAYER LIST – Bob and Karen Baron, Laura Summers,

The people of the United States of America and their leaders

Leaders in our own community, province, and country

We give you grateful thanks, O God, for all the saints who have gone before us and who now dwell eternally with you. We thank you for their witness in our midst, their faithfulness to you, and their courage in the face of adversity. And we thank you that for them, there is now no more crying or pain, no more heartbreak or injustice, but only the great joy of worshiping you and serving you with all the hosts of heaven. Lead us, we pray, to those thin places where we may sense their presence anew here on earth, and prepare us for that great day when we will be reunited with all the saints of heaven, giving blessing and honor and glory to you forever . We join our hearts and voices now as we pray together using Jesus' words:

LORD'S PRAYER

Our Father in Heaven, Hallowed be your name, Your kingdom come,

Your will be done, On earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread.

Forgive us our sins As we forgive those who sin against us.

Save us from the time of trial And deliver us from evil.

For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours, Now and forever. Amen.

OFFERING QUOTE -C.S. Lewis

One of the dangers of having a lot of money is that you may be quite satisfied with the kinds of happiness money can give and so fail to realize your need for God.

BENEDICTION

The Spirit of God is upon you and has anointed you.

You are the salt of the earth and you bring light to the world.

You are not too young or too old, you are not too rich or too needy to bring good news to the impoverished, to give a hand to the broken-hearted, and to live out freedom and pardon through the gifts you have been given.

So remember to pack peace in your toolbox, hope in your briefcase, love in your lunch bag, and may integrity, honesty, and joy be your designer wear of choice.

Do not be frightened, for you are never alone.

The God in whose image you are made

will walk with you and guide you today, tomorrow, and every day.