**Revelation 19:1-9** November 19, 2017

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 *1After this I heard what sounded like the roar of a great multitude in heaven shouting: “Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God, 2for true and just are his judgments. He has condemned the great prostitute who corrupted the earth by her adulteries. He has avenged on her the blood of his servants.” 3And again they shouted: “Hallelujah! The smoke from her goes up for ever and ever…”*

 *6Then I heard what sounded like a great multitude, like the roar of rushing waters and like loud peals of thunder, shouting: “Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns. 7Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready.”*

Dear Friends in Christ,

**Good Guys Win! (Actually, God Gives Them the Victory)**

 When we were getting ready to move overseas where they had no television, no video rentals, no cable or dish, no internet, we decided to record some movies. We filled up VCR tapes with movies, packed them in boxes and sent them to Africa. We waited and waited. When the shipment arrived, we unpacked the 21” TV and VCR tapes, and started watching movies.

 In a general, movies are pretty predictable. First you get to know the characters. Then you discover the problem they have to conquer. As the movie goes, things get more and more complicated, so that just a few minutes from the end you are at a crisis point where you know everything will work out, but you are kind of worried that things *won’t*… and boom, the movies would cut out and go to the next movie on the tape.

 Something went wrong when we taped some of the movies. I’d like to blame the VCR, but it was probably user error. It was really frustrating. We would watch for an hour or two and then we never find out what happened. Did the good guys win? Did they live happily ever after? We didn’t know. Now really, it didn’t even matter, because those are just stories. But something about the human mind hates unfinished stories.

 Which is the problem with life. No matter when we depart from this world, we will have unfinished business. We will have invested much of ourselves into lives and projects that we will never know the end of.

 Faith poses a similar problem. We believe. We know that Jesus came once to save us from our sins. But, in a sense, that’s the easy part, because it has happened, it has been recorded. We also believe that Jesus will come again, as he promised. That’s the difficult part. Jesus can come back at any time, yet very likely, like our great-grandparents and great-great grandparents, we will not see the end of the story. We may very well be laid to rest in the earth, not yet seeing the end of the story of our faith. Our lives of faith, at least to earthbound eyes, are stories without endings.

**I. Revelation: the End of the Story**

 This was especially a problem for the very early Christians. In the early church there was something of an expectation that Jesus would come back within the lifetimes of most of those involved. So to the Christians of about 90 or 100AD, when the book of Revelation was written, they perhaps were wondering how the story of their faith would end. Many *had* thought that they were going to get to see the end, that God’s grand plan of salvation would be completed in their lifetimes, that Jesus would come back the second time and take them to heaven. But it wasn’t happening.

 And then persecution started. At first, the Jewish faith persecuted the Christians. That is what the stoning of Stephen was about (Acts 7) But the Christians survived that.

 Now there were new persecutions from the communities in which Christians lived. Much of that “persecution” was what we would today call discrimination.

 In the ancient world, religion was not a private matter, it was a public matter. And Christians refused to take part in the public pagan worship. They wouldn’t go up to the temples to make their sacrifices. Christians refused to take part in and even condemned many behaviors that were considered pretty normal: drunken parties, homosexuality, immorality, etc. Because they were so not normal, people looked with suspicion on Christians. Christians were disruptors of the social order. And so Christians became the victims of discrimination and a bad reputation.

 But once in a while there were localized physical persecutions. In some places Christians were imprisoned or their property was confiscated. It didn’t seem that the kingdom Christ had promised was coming, that there was going to be a happy ending. It looked to be getting worse!

 The book of Revelation is God’s revelation to faithful Christians living in troubling times. It let them know—you guessed it—the end of the story.

 We, too, look at the world and wonder. What about the growing immoral nature of our nation, our world? And when people do start to talk about moral issues, as has been abundantly broadcast for the past month, have you noticed what is missing? God is never mentioned. No one discusses God as the one who sets the standards for how men and women interact with each other. If people had listened to God’s commandments and counsel, we would have a lot less of a problem!

 Other things don’t seem to be pointing to happy endings. What about the chronic pain and disease you feel? What about the anxieties and worries? What about the people around you who make your life miserable? We, most likely, won’t get to see the end of the story on those issues. Immorality and violence will continue. We tend to get sicker rather than better. Bad neighbors often get replaced by worse neighbors. There will always be new worries, new anxieties, new diseases. Always!

 God’s message in Revelation is one of encouragement and hope to his Church. God gave a vision, not just of heaven, but heaven and earth. God unfolded to the apostle John the future of earth. The future of earth was not positive. There would be trials and tribulations. Terrible ones. Persecutions, disease, natural disasters and death. For non-Christians and for Christians too. Which might make you say, “I’d have been happier without news like that!” But it is reassuring to know that this is how God has said things will be as long as we are on this earth.

 In the book of Revelation, God also shows the story of heaven, the part that we cannot see, . He shows us the end of the story, the part of the story that comes after this life. Revelation 19 is that end of the story.

**II. Rejoicing over the Defeat of the Church’s Enemies**

 Our reading is the part where we look into heaven. In heaven we see God’s people in a victory party or parade. They are singing songs of joy, praising God. The first word in their song, of their hymn, is “Hallelujah!” “Praise the Lord!” Yes, this was George Handel’s inspiration for the Hallelujah chorus. His famous song is an attempt to capture the Bible’s feeling of joy and victory in heaven.

 In heaven, after this life, God’s people sing. They sing for two reasons which are symbolized in two women. Now in the book of Revelation, remember that God speaks in symbols. The two women mentioned are ***“the great prostitute”*** and the ***“bride [of the Lamb].”*** They are parallels, counterparts.

 Without too much explanation, ***“the great prostitute”*** in Revelation stands for all that calls itself a follower of God, but is not. Frequently in the Old Testament, God likens Israel’s spiritual unfaithfulness to prostitution (Ps. 106:39 et al). Now it might sound strange to put prostitution and religion together, but prostitution was part of the worship practices of the ancient world around God’s people. Whether you are talking about the Canaanites surrounding the Israelites, or the Greeks among whom the Christians lived, prostitution was part of religion. ***“The great prostitute”*** of Revelation is a symbol of all religion, all spirituality if you will, which directs itself to something other than Christ.

 This same spirit endures in our day in those who tell us that we need not a Savior from our sins. It endures in those who tell us that all religious thought is more or less different flavors of one kind of food. These are all the great prostitute who are ever looking after soul mates other than the Lord Jesus Christ.

 The multitudes of heaven, the believers praise God for his judgment on this first woman. They sing, ***“Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God… He has condemned the great prostitute who corrupted the earth by her adulteries. He has avenged on her the blood of his servants.”*** God will win! We will win!

 Do you know what happens the week after a sports team wins a championship? Do you know what people say about a week after the Super Bowl, a week after the March Madness championship game? They start asking, “Can they win again?”

 The saints in heaven sing, ***“Hallelujah! The smoke from her goes up for ever and ever.”*** The saints of heaven rejoice that once we enter heaven, never again will she challenge God’s people.

 All through our time in this world our victories over temptation are followed by more temptations. We can kick the bottle, but it will be a temptation for life. We can learn God-pleasing, Christ-thanking behaviors, but we will have to (by the Holy Spirit’s strength) continue to train ourselves in righteousness.

 Heaven will not be like that. When we are taken to be with Christ, there will never again be a temptation for us to be unfaithful to Christ.

**III. Rejoicing over the Union of Christ and His Church**

 Which brings us to the final and greatest Hallelujah: ***“Then I heard what sounded like a great multitude, like the roar of rushing waters and like loud peals of thunder, shouting, ‘Hallelujah!... For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready.’”*** The other woman the saints in heaven sing about is the ***“bride [of the Lamb].”*** She is a picture of the Church. By “Church” I don’t mean this church or the Lutheran church. “Church” is all people of all time who spiritually belong to Jesus Christ. They sing Hallelujah because the Lamb and his bride will be wed.

 The joy of a wedding is how it will be at the end of time when Christ comes to earth, raises the dead, and takes his bride to his place in heaven. He will be united with his beloved for whom he bled and died, that she should be his.

 There we will see and know our Lord Jesus in perfection. No more worrying about how this life will turn out. No more worrying about disease or violence. No more wondering if we are acceptable to other people, if there is something wrong with us, if anybody cares. No more worries over wars or politics. No more temptations to be unfaithful to Jesus. We will have the life that God once created for Adam and Eve.

 At our house, sometimes we watch one of those feel-good movies where everything turns out right. At the end, just about always, someone will say, “Good guys win!” And the rest of us say, “Good guys win!”

 Revelation is kind of like that. More than any other book of the Bible, you get to the end and say, “Good guys win!” Not about a movie, but about faith and life. Except that it isn’t exactly that the good guys win, because we aren’t good by nature, and we aren’t the ones who win the victory. But through faith we share in the blood-bought victory of Christ Jesus, we win because Jesus won.

 Oh Lord, keep us faithful. Strengthen us so that we are not confused by all flashing lights and fancy ringtones of this world. Make us strong against our flesh which tells us to get what we want today. And make us faithful witnesses so that our children and their children, and those we know and love and even those we don’t, that all of them may one day rejoice in heaven.

 Heavenly Father, I want to be in heaven with your Son and his people. You have shown us the end of the story, and it is beautiful. Thank you for letting us know. Now keep us faithful. Amen.