Revelation 7:9-17 All Saints Day 11.01.26 Bill Uetricht

You probably would be surprised to know what I do to prepare for the preaching task. Yes, of course, I study the Biblical texts. I sit with them for a while, hoping something within me grabs me. I write ideas down. I consult other people. But I also do things like watching You Tube videos, sometimes searching for something I might be able to use or at least something that gives me ideas for how I can make the topic come alive. This past week I spent time watching a video titled "What Are the Interludes: Music Without Theory—Episode 18."

Why the heck did I watch such a video? Well, I was trying to get my brain wrapped around interludes because it is an interlude that appears in our reading from Revelation today. The woman on the video suggested that interludes are musical staples for Hip Hop and Rhythm and Blues. She claims that they are pit stops, rest stops. They are like musical palate cleansers. They refocus and recalibrate our attention.

Today's text from Revelation would have been like a pit stop for those who first heard it. It would have been a resting place between two very challenging occurrences in this apocalyptic book. In the Revelation story, the sixth seal has just been opened. The book that is revealing what is to occur is being cracked open, and as you might expect, if you know anything about apocalyptic Biblical numbers, as the sixth seal is opened, all kinds of bad things occur: a great earthquake; the sun becomes black as sackcloth; the moon becomes like blood; the sky vanishes; every mountain and island is removed. It's a day of awfulness. And so, we're all depressed and fearful. We're lost in destruction and the possibility of despair.

But Revelation doesn't want to leave us there. Now truthfully, it won't be long and we will be back there, when the seventh seal is opened, bringing us more cosmic disasters, plagues, and wars. Before we go there, though, we get an interlude, a rest stop. For a time, our attention is refocused, recalibrated. We are provided a vision of heaven.

In this vision, there is a great multitude of people from every nation, all tribes and languages, standing before the throne of God and before the Lamb, Jesus Christ. These folks, victims of Roman persecution, "they who have been through the great ordeal," are declaring victory. They are singing praise to God. And God is sheltering them, protecting them from the scorching heat, making sure that they never again hunger or thirst, wiping away every tear from their eyes. In between the horror of the sixth seal and the devastating character of the seventh seal, the interlude calms us down, buoys us up, gives us reason to be resilient.

Sometimes we need interludes more than we could ever imagine. Sometimes life seems to come at us from both directions. Life has been tough, and the future looks scary. And so we ask, as does the hymn writer Ray Mackeever, "What shall we do, between the times?" Revelation wants us to live with a picture of who we are in God between the times. It wants us to know that the oppressed should not give up, that a lamb, a little lamb, a slain lamb, a crucified and rejected one, not a bossy Roman leader, runs the world. The interlude is meant to encourage us. The point of the whole book of Revelation is discovered in this interlude. We can live with hope between the times.

That, I believe, is also what the author of First John is trying to communicate in our second reading for this All Saints' Day. This author doesn't provide us with wild, apocalyptic images, as does Revelation. But his concern is like that of Revelation. What does it mean to live in the interlude that *now* is in light of a coming future. Listen to his words: "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called the children of God, and that is what we are." That is what we are now. This is the identity we live with in the interlude.

In the Greco-Roman world, your parentage mattered. It mattered that you had especially a father. You have one, First John is saying. You are a part of the family. You have an important status. You have a high position. You are not only *called* a child of God; you *are* a child of God.

Now what about the future? What's going to happen to you at the end? The author of First John isn't overly definitive. He doesn't say too much, which is so unlike many Christians of the current era who seem to have what happens after death all figured out. He says, "What we will be has not yet been revealed." In other words, we don't really know. We are living in a time of an interlude, moving from one stage to the next. This is a time that includes a whole lot of not knowing. But this we do know. We are children of God now. And at the end, we won't be anything less. When he is revealed, we will be like him, First John says. We will see him and become as he is. I am not sure we know what that means practically, but it does reassure us that our ultimate futures are secure, that those futures connect us to the Christ.

We live in hope, therefore, and in the meantime, we hear the call, as First John says, "to purify ourselves, as the Christ is pure." If

we are going to be like him, we now are to live in a way that is in keeping with who he is.

We Lutherans become a bit nervous when we hear such talk. Purity is related to what is often called *holiness.* And Lutherans haven't always been so fond of the holiness tradition, as we have thought that it takes us down the path of works righteousness, causing us to think that we earn our favor with God through our proper behavior. The holiness people have given us a long list of don'ts: don't drink; don't play cards, don't wear makeup; don't go to movies; don't swear; don't have naughty thoughts. This tradition has lost some of its religious foundation in our day but, nevertheless, can be seen in secular movements in which many do's and don'ts have been created around our food and language selections. You better not say this; you better not eat that.

I don't think that is holiness at its best. Rather, it is holiness at its worst. Holiness has to do with being different, with living differently than the dominant culture demands. For First John, holiness looks like admitting when you are wrong, receiving forgiveness, loving others. For the culture, life is often about validating yourself, not needing forgiveness, loving people only when they give you what you want or need, when they provide you with a transaction that benefits you.

For us Christians, life lived in the interlude, life lived in light of who Christ is and who we will become at the end, means living in a way that views other people as treasured, dignified human beings whose worth is not dependent upon what they can give you, what status they have, how much money they possess, how powerful they are. Holiness for Christians looks a whole lot like the beatitudes of

Matthew's Jesus in which the honored ones are the poor in spirit, the mourning, the meek, those who are seeking a more just life, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, the persecuted. Holiness looks like a turned-upside-down world. Holiness is treasuring what God treasures, honoring what God honors, not what the world treasures and honors. Holiness is not living like a bunch of goody-two-shoes folks who want to take the fun out of life for yourself and especially for others. Rather, holiness is loving as God loves.

I like what Rachel Held Evans says about loving as God loves, about practicing holiness: "Jesus is what the living, breathing will of God looks like. This includes compassion for the poor, esteem for women, healing for the sick, and solidarity with the suffering. It means breaking bread with outcasts and embracing little children. It means choosing forgiveness over retribution, the cross over revenge, and cooking breakfast for the friend who betrayed you."

This is how we live in the meantime. This is how we fill up the interlude. This is what faithful, Christ-centered lives look like as we experience the seals being opened, as we deal with the difficulty of the past and the uncertainty of the future. This is what we do "between the times."