
Heaven is Where We are Remembered

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**A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam Candler
Atlanta, Georgia
All Saints Sunday**

*I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count,
from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages,
, singing "Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving
and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.
--Revelation 7:9, 12*

Five wonderful parishioners from this church, plus five priests, and myself, have just returned yesterday from the Annual Council of the Diocese of Atlanta. Each year, representatives from every parish in this diocese, and every priest, meet for council and fellowship, often here at the Cathedral. But this year, we got to go somewhere else! We traveled to Rome! , I mean Rome, Georgia.

I always enjoy seeing other parts of Georgia, but I especially enjoy seeing Rome. Rome is the hometown of my mother's family. So, when I arrived on Thursday a few hours before the opening reception, I had a chance to visit the old cemetery where many of my ancestors are buried. Myrtle Hill Cemetery is built on top of one of the seven original hills of Rome, right above the Etowah River. Its summit still affords an excellent view of a dear town, the city of Rome.

It was raining on Thursday, so I pulled on my raincoat and hat; and I set out walking up and down that hill, looking for my grandmother's grave. I could not remember exactly where it was. I couldn't find it.

Earlier, I had called my mother, down in Coweta County, for directions, but she was away. So I telephoned her again right there, in the rain, after I was actually perspiring from wandering up and down the terraces on that hill. On the phone, a hundred miles away, she couldn't remember exactly how to tell me where it was. She had a vision of it, but her directions to it were vague and sketchy.

But then, with her persistent guidance, while I was still on the phone, as I was gazing out across the tombs, I suddenly saw my goal: the stone wall surrounding the "Graham" family plot. Sweet and spectacular.

So, I paid my respects to my ancestors. I saw the small marble plaques of my great grandfather and great grandmother, many uncles and favorite aunts, and I saw the stone of my dear grandmother. I snapped a few photographs with my cell phone, and later that night I sent the photos to some of my family and cousins. One cousin wrote back, "I bet they are having a great time playing bridge up in heaven!"

It's a great vision. What are they doing in the kingdom of heaven? What actually does happen when we die? Where is heaven?

Last Sunday, I was having lunch with a friend whom I had not seen in some time; in fact, her father had died since I had last seen her. She shared some memories of being with her father as he died. Many of you have known similar times, similar moments, when time stops. You are with someone you love, simply waiting. It is holy time.

For my friend, the time was so holy that she seems to have had a vision during that time. She saw things, and she could remember them quite plainly to me. She had seen tall, strange shapes, sort of like people, but something different from people, too. They were illogical, irrational, strange shapes. She had seen holy and non-explainable forms.

I was struck by her memories, her vision, if you will, for her vision captures something of the non-rational energy of death. Death is something we cannot control with our logic, with our rational thinking, with our organization. When the time comes for death, we must simply let it happen. Let it be.

This is one reason why I like The Book of Revelation to St. John. It is a book for people who are willing to imagine what death and heaven might be like. It is a set of "revelations." It purports to be a series of visions that someone named "John" saw, and it defies explanation.

And, oh, what visions he saw! All sorts of strange images and shapes! All manner of angels and white-robed characters! Horses and golden lampstands, trumpets and scrolls, seals and censers! Washings and blood and lambs, plagues and beasts, and then some sort of great, high mountain, with a heavenly city and river of life.

At Revelation, chapter three, verse twenty, Jesus says, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock! If you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in." (Revelation 3:20).

Unfortunately, when someone knocks on the door of my house these days, they turn out to be some sort of Jehovah's witness. They want to tell me all about Revelation 7:4, and the exact number of those sealed and saved. That number, for those of you who have not heard, is exactly 144,000. Some of our denominations claim they have the end times all figured out; only 144,000 will be saved, in this particular way, and you better make sure you are one of them.

By the way, that reminds me of one of my favorite jokes: "What do you get when you cross a Jehovah's Witness and a Unitarian?", "Someone who knocks on your door for no apparent reason!"

I often feel it is my duty to engage those persons in theological conversation, so that they will not be a temptation or stumbling block to my next door neighbor! But what I do is point to another verse in the Book of the Revelation to John. In fact, it is the section of Revelation that we have read today, on All Saints Sunday-the very next verses of chapter seven.

"After this," says John the Revelator, "I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white," (Revelation 7:9).

Yes, right after he says "144,000," he sees a number that no one can count. That means "infinite." It means something that defies our careful and exact explanation.

As strange as the Book of Revelation is, I actually think it works quite well in describing death and the kingdom of heaven. We read this beautiful passage from a strange book on All Saints Day, and on All Saints Sunday, but the entire book gives us a vision of what people are actually doing in the kingdom of heaven.

And what are the saints doing up in heaven? They are singing and praying, praising and rejoicing. Listen to the words: "Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God!" (Revelation 7: 12). That's some serious praising. It is as if there are not enough words to pray and to praise God.

The Book of Revelation seems to be a kind of prayer book, a liturgical manual, with all the prayers that all the saints are using in heaven. That is why we read from this strange vision on All Saints Sunday. And, whenever you do read the Book of Revelation, be sure to read the last chapter. (It's the last chapter of the entire Bible, too.) No matter what else has

occurred in that odd book, in the last chapter, God wins.

God wins. That is worth remembering in our own tangled lives, when we sense that we have fought with wild beasts and demons. When we have suffered plagues that are impossible to describe. When we have known the suffering and sadness of death. We have all known those things. In the last chapter of the Bible, God wins.

What is going on in heaven? What are the saints doing? Well, it's hard to describe exactly. We get visions of strange shapes and words that don't make any sense. Maybe they are playing bridge. But the best I can make out is that they are rejoicing and singing.

So, if we want to get ourselves ready for the kingdom of heaven, we ought to practice rejoicing and singing. I hope this is what we practice every Sunday, and every time we celebrate Eucharist.

Today, we are here to remember the saints, from every tribe and nation, people and language. We remember the saints who have died, and we remember the new saints that we baptize today.

And when we remember the saints, old and new, we touch something holy. I believe we touch heaven itself. Last Thursday, on that holy hill, when I remembered my grandmother and grandfather, my great-grandmother and my great-grandfather, I was in heaven. Even in the pouring rain, lost with sketchy directions, and wandering and tired, I had reached heaven.

Heaven is where saints are remembered. And maybe it is when we remember the saints, that they are truly in heaven.

Where is heaven? Maybe heaven is wherever each of us is remembered, too. Heaven is where we are remembered.

AMEN.

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