
Why I Like the Book of Revelation

A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam Candler
Atlanta, Georgia
The Fourth Sunday of Easter

After this 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, with palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice, saying, "Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!" The Revelation to John 7:9-10

Don't you love the Revelation to John? I sure do; I really love the Book of The Revelation to John. You know the book. The Revelation. The last book in the Bible. Some people think it is the craziest book in the Bible. I think it is, too, but I still love it. Some people think it is utterly indecipherable. I think it is, too, but I still love it.

Some people think that the book of Revelation is better left to the emotion-charged raving rapturists! You know who they are. They are those people who have figured out every hidden clue in the book, and they seem to discover the same thing every time: they're saved and you are not!

I do not think that. I do not think that the Book of Revelation gives us the detailed itinerary of the last days. It is a shame that this book has been hijacked by such terrorists as the post-tribulation millennialists, and the pre-rapture tribulationists. They've done the math: They will be saved, and you will be left behind.

The math ends up all over the place. Will there be only a hundred and forty-four thousand who will be saved? Are they only the elders, or is that everyone? There are a thousand years somewhere. Is that before the tribulation or afterward? Are we in the tribulation now? Does that include the flood?

There is another kind of person who is the exact opposite of the post-rapture tribulationists. This is the person who throws out the entire Book of Revelation: it is too rowdy and rambunctious. This second type of person considers himself above the riff-raff and common emotionalism of popular culture.

This second kind of person is a lot like the traditional Episcopalian. The traditional Episcopalian is so interested in the mind that he forgets the heart. Yes, we Episcopalians sometimes claim that we like our church, "because we do not have to check our mind at the door." Well and good. But the problem is that we check our emotion at the door! We check our heart at the door.

We love to yell and cheer at sports events, but we refuse to get emotional at church. That's too bad. We prefer to listen to public broadcasting instead of V-103. That's too bad. We would rather speculate about nonsense in The DaVinci Code, instead of the nonsense in the Left Behind series!

A few years ago, I sat and enjoyed a great teacher. This great teacher knew how to impart energy to her students and to her audience. She was from Ghana, Africa; and she was leading an African Dance Ensemble at Agnes Scott College, here in Atlanta. As her students danced to wonderful rhythms and sang beautiful melodies, she played with the audience. She

encouraged us to sing and clap, too; we weren't doing so well.

At one point, she stopped and said, "Listen, I am giving out energy to you. I want you to give energy back to me in the same degree! When I give out energy, I want to get it back!" I loved it. I could see her guiding and giving energy to the dancers, too. At every spare moment, she proclaimed how lovely and beautiful each of the women were, how each of their bodies was so different, but each so beautiful in her own way. The entire room throbbed with energy.

After the two-hour performance, I spoke to my daughter. In fact, my daughter had been one of the dancers in the ensemble. "What a great teacher!" I exclaimed. "That woman knows how to encourage people!"

"Oh, she's tough," my daughter sighed. "You should see her in rehearsal. She looks happy in public performance, but she is sure tough on us in practice!"

Then I understood. It takes practice to be happy.

It takes practice to be happy. It takes practice to enjoy the gifts God has given us. It takes practice to enjoy heaven.

Heaven, I believe, is ultimately about enjoying the salvation energy of God. Heaven is about giving and receiving that positive spiritual energy. When we gather to pray and sing on Sunday mornings, we are meant to be practicing for the kingdom of heaven.

Heaven is not about what is left behind; Heaven is not the late great planet earth. Heaven is not about who is among the one hundred forty-four thousand. Heaven is about giving energy. Heaven is about inspiration. Heaven is about salvation energy!

And it takes practice!

This is what I learn from the Book of Revelation. Heaven is going to be an energetic and inspiring place. Heaven is going to be a place where folks give energy to one another. Listen to them at the throne of God. What are they doing?

They are bowing down and singing lustily. *Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.*

The Book of Revelation, with its singing our praying and shouting, is really a liturgical rehearsal for the kingdom of God. In those visions, we glimpse what people in heaven really are doing.

They are from every tribe and every nation. Ghana and the United States. Nigeria and Canada. From every language and people: Zulu and English. South African and Hispanic.

Their number is not limited. The number, one hundred and forty-four thousand, does not begin to define the tremendous and expansive energy of the kingdom of God. Revelation, chapter seven, clearly says that the number of those before the throne was too large to count. That is the expanding energy of God.

And Revelation, chapter seven, also proclaims clearly that salvation does not belong to any one of those groups, not to any one of those tribes. Salvation belongs to God. Salvation is about the expanding energy of God. Salvation gathers around a lamb, a vulnerable and slain lamb. We worship someone willing to suffer. We are led by a Shepherd who actually turns out to be a slain lamb.

This is the great reversal of The Book of Revelation. [for the reader: I point you to one of the best explanations of this reversal in a book called *The Rapture Exposed*, by Barbara Rossing; she also speaks excellently against "Left Behind" theology.]

In the Book of Revelation, salvation is not accomplished by the ways of this world. Salvation is not about winning some violent battle. Salvation is not about Armageddon and who will be left behind. Salvation is about following a Lamb, who

has won through suffering.

That's worth singing about. It's why we have been singing Hymn 417 during the Easter season.

*Worthy is Christ, the Lamb who was slain,
Whose blood set us free to be people of God.
This is the feast of victory for our God.*

It's worth singing again and again. Every time we sing it, we are practicing. We are practicing for the kingdom of heaven, when every one of us, from every tribe and nation and language are gathered around that throne of salvation.

This is the feast of victory for our God!

AMEN.

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