
Blessing and Glory, Honor and Power

**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!" And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, singing, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen." The Revelation to John, chapter 7.

I love the Book of Revelation. I know most Episcopalians think it is the craziest book in the Bible. I think it is, too, but I still love it. I know most Episcopalians think it is utterly indecipherable. I think it is, too, but I still love it. Most Episcopalians think that the book of Revelation is better left to the emotion-charged raving rapturists! (You know: those people who have figured out every hidden clue in the book, and lo and behold, it looks like I'm going to be saved but 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. In fact, 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.

Actually, the math ends up all over the place. There are a hundred and forty-four thousand who will be saved, right? But 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?

Consider the energy wasted on these so-called secret formulas. That's the way one sort of person deals with the Book of Revelation.

There is another kind of person who is the exact opposite of the post-rapture tribulationist. 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 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 National Public Radio instead of the AM radio talk shows. That's too bad. We do not enjoy the Book of Revelation because we do not understand its emotion; we do not sense the tremendous energy contained in that vision. We would rather speculate about nonsense in *The Da Vinci Code*, instead of the nonsense in the *Left Behind* series! That's too bad.

I want to preach against the traditional Episcopalian today. It is important to hear the emotion of the AM radio talk shows. It is important to honor our hearts as well as our minds. It is important to let our emotions be inspired and touched.

Last Sunday night, 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 us, the audience. She encouraged us to sing and clap, too.

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 energy of God. Heaven is about giving and receiving that positive spiritual energy.

Heaven is not about what is left behind. Heaven is not about 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.

But 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 singing! 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.*

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

The number one hundred and forty-four thousand does not even begin to define the tremendous energy of the kingdom of God. Revelation 7 clearly says that the multitude of those before the throne was too large to count. That is the expanding energy of God!

Revelation, chapter seven, 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.

Traditional tribalism will not get it. Traditional Episcopalianism will not get it.

But wait!

Maybe we will get it. Remember that hymn we sang at the beginning of the service? Hymn 417. That is in the Episcopal hymnal. It is a passage from this very book of the bible, the Book of Revelation.

Let's sing it again. Let's practice singing it again. But this time let's sing it with a new energy. Let's sing it with the same energy that we will be singing it one day in the kingdom of heaven. Today is practice. Every Sunday is practice. The kingdom of heaven, as described in the Book of Revelation, is about singing and glory and honor and energy. It is not about trying to figure out who the one hundred and forty-four thousand are. It is not about speculating who will be left behind.

The kingdom of heaven is about every one of us, from every tribe, language, and people singing with all the energy we can: "This is the feast of victory for our God."

AMEN.

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