

Nov. 7, 2021 All Saints Day
Following Jesus into the Middle of Time
Rev. 7:9-17

Have you seen the Disney Movie "Angels in the Outfield?" If you have not seen it, it's about a young boy whose mother has died and whose father is unable or unwilling to make the commitment it takes to be a parent. So, placed in a foster home where he awaits someone who will adopt him, the boy's greatest pleasure is following the baseball team that plays in a nearby stadium. It hardly matters to him that the team, the Anaheim Angels, is the worst team in the league -- they are in last place, having played twenty-five games and lost them all.

One day his father pays a surprise visit. "I came to say that I'm going up North," he said. "I said that when I came it'd be to get you, but it ain't working out that way." They have a brief conversation, but not a satisfying one, and then his father mounts his motorcycle to go. "Dad," the boy says, "when are we going to be a family again?" His father revs his engines, points to the baseball stadium, and then answers sarcastically, "I'd say when the Angels win the pennant."

The rest of the movie, in part at least, is about angels. Not baseball players, but real live winged creatures from Heaven who intervene dramatically to answer the boy's prayers -- that his favorite team reverse their own losing streak and win the pennant. Nobody else sees them, but he does. They swoop down to give outfielders the lift they need to be able to catch the line-drive. They emerge behind batters -- even the team's worst batters -- to give them the extra charge they need to knock the ball out of the park. They talk to this boy, and they encourage him; and right there in the middle of the unholy mess he's in -- he begins to see his life in a different light. He begins to see the angels and to hear their voices and to believe **that life is permeated, from start to finish, with heavenly intervention.**

I think about this little family movie, and I wonder if it's not a parable for people like you and me -- people who live in the middle of time. It's like being in the middle of a big lake, from which point it's often hard to see, with much clarity, either the shore from which we have embarked or the one toward which we're headed. Individuals often understand this, around

middle-age if not before; but, as a culture, too, we are people who live in the middle of time. As a culture, we've lived long enough to notice how much we miss our innocence; but, here in the middle of time, we aren't always able to see, with much clarity, just where it is that we're headed and what it will take to get there. Here, in the middle of time -- when we often feel so "in over our head" and aware of how easy it might be to sink -- we know those moments when we long, like that boy did, for evidence of some word which will validate and permeate and give meaning to our time as we know it--some reminder that there is a whole lot of heavenly intervention going on all around us.

Such evidence is so often hard to find.

Elbert Hubbard is the one who said, "Life is just one darn thing after another." The church speaks in a different way to people living in the middle of time. The church looks at time as we know it, and sees it in the light of what we call "eschatological time." The church looks at the time we are living in now, and asserts that -- because we have glimpsed the future through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and the coming of His Spirit into the world; because God through Jesus Christ has begun the ongoing redemption of the world -- all of our time, therefore, is charged with new possibility. All of our time is permeated, from start to finish, with heavenly intervention. Having seen a glimpse of what God has in mind for the future of the world, we haven't got to wait for that world to come in its fullness in order to begin living in it. We can start living triumphantly into that world now! So, for Christians, it isn't "just one darn thing after another." Even in the middle of time we can begin living out our lives in light of the promise of an expected future.

The church, at its best, helps us envision that future -- even in the midst of the lives we're living now. It does so in a number of ways, of course; but it does so most importantly in the act of worship. For what happens in our worship, at its best, is that all the things that matter the most in the middle of time get overthrown and transformed by an encounter with God's vision of the world as it will surely be some day. Every week we pray "thy kingdom come," and you know what? It does!

We have now, what I think, in our text for today from the Book of the Revelation to John, is a glimpse of time as it will be, which John, the author of the Revelation, wanted to give as a word of encouragement to a

cross-shaped community of Christians who, like us, were living in the middle of time. These were people who had heard the good news of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, yes, and were striving hard to learn and to speak and to live the language of the Kingdom of God, even though doing so was costly; but they had also been reading the papers, and watching the news, and suffering the consequences of their faithfulness -- so much so that some of them were beginning to wonder if, in fact, it wasn't "just one darn thing after another."

John, in writing to this community of Christians, gave them a gift. John pulled back the curtain that obscured their vision of history, in order to show them a party going on in heaven. A party, of all things, by those who, like themselves, had endured "the great ordeal" -- had borne the cross of faithful living in the middle of time -- and who now, vindicated by God, were in heaven praising and glorifying God's holy name. Which was John's way of saying, to them and to us: Have courage, you who bear the ministry of the cross! For you are moving toward the triumph of God! Your life in the middle of time has meaning because of where it's all headed.

There's a modern cathedral in England -- a cathedral built within the lifetimes of many of us -- that features one whole wall made of glass. The massive south wall of that cathedral made entirely of glass! And etched into the glass are the huge figures -- four feet wide and ten feet tall -- of saints and angels. They're having a party -- blowing trumpets and making merry and swinging from the chandeliers and dancing across that massive wall of glass. And, were that the only thing you saw when looking at that glass wall, you might justifiably conclude that there's something taunting and irreverent and downright immoral about such fun going on in the heights of heaven while there are a host of us suffering here in history's most horrific century. You might look at that wall, and ask how they could construct such a thing in the middle of time where there is AIDS and starvation, and the stalking hatred of militia groups, and the neglect and murder of children, and the meanness of our rhetoric, and the growing gap between those who have and those who don't. You might look at that glass wall and wonder what sort of God would have the nerve to throw a party like that in times like these, and what sort of church would have the nerve to go to it!

That cathedral is located in Coventry, which makes all the difference in the world. For, in November of 1940, Coventry suffered the longest air raid

endured in any one night by any city in England during World War II. It was an air raid which killed and destroyed and reduced the whole city to ruins, including its cathedral.

When they built the new cathedral, they chose, as the purpose of its ministry, the theme of "resurrection through sacrifice."

So to look through that modern glass wall, beyond all the saints dancing in heaven, is then to see the painful ruins of the old bombed-out church. The rubble of those ruins, that so aptly symbolized life in the middle of time, cannot be seen through that glass wall except in light of the promise from beyond time -- the promise that God gathers up all of our flawed history, gathers it up into God's holy and redemptive purposes -- and such a visual encounter with God's promise for the future permeates that pile of rubble with meaning that is not otherwise there.

The Church, in the middle of time, is the embodiment of resurrection through sacrifice!

There is no resurrection without sacrifice; but in the midst of sacrifice -- in the midst of being the church and being faithful and bearing the cross and tasting the food and speaking the language of the country toward which we are traveling -- there is resurrection.

And friends, it's available to us today -- in the language we speak, and the food we taste, and the cross that we bear!

Therefore, with angels and archangels and with all the company of heaven, let us worship and adore God's glorious name -- right here in the middle of time!