

“Eternally Present” (a homily)

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts
November 1, 2020 – All Saints Day
Revelation 7:9-17

We are a people who have a great deal of interest in the meaning of time, and we are fascinated with time travel. This can be seen in many of our works of literature. I’m thinking of classics such as *The Time Machine* by H.G. Wells and *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens. When I was a youngster, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* by Mark Twain and *A Wrinkle in Time* by Madeleine L'Engle were favorites. This can also in many of our great films, like *Groundhog Day*; of course, *Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure*; and my favorite, *Back to the Future*.

I think I love the 1985 film *Back to the Future* most because it tells the story of a teenaged Marty McFly living when I was a teenager. And like him, I rode a skateboard and occasionally wore an overstuffed vest that looked something like a life preserver. I love that movie because it takes me back in time, reminding me of my own childhood. I also love it because it tells a story about Marty's parents, who were teens in 1955, a time that Marty traveled back to in the film. My parents were also teenagers in 1955, and so traveling back in time with Marty back to this era helped me to see that my parents lived in kind of the same way that I did and struggled with the many of the same things that I did. In fact, youth in 1955 struggled with not only the same things as our youth did in 1985, but the same things that they struggled with in 2015 and

even today. So this movie about time helped me to understand my parents just a little bit better and to realize they were actual humans who had many of the same struggles that I did. And it helped me feel a little bit more connected to them.

My favorite time travel book of all time is the Revelation of John. Maybe it's not specifically a time travel book, but it does talk a lot about time and the meaning of it. And this is common in its genre, called apocalyptic literature. In the apocalyptic Revelation of John, we read about a fantastic future, a fantastic past, and a fantastic present.

This book is filled with fantastic imagery that is very challenging for us to understand. For this reason, this good book of Revelation is oftentimes ignored in Christian circles (at least outside of evangelicalism). Martin Luther said that he couldn't find Christ in any of its pages. John Calvin wrote lots of New Testament commentaries, but not one on the Revelation. Many people share the assessment of George Bernard Shaw, who said in 1933 that the Revelation was a “scary book” and “nothing more than a curious record of the visions of a drug addict.” Christians and others throughout history have tended to avoid the book or speak ill about it. And this is understandable as it is hard to understand, is filled with imagery that can be a bit spooky and scary, and tells the tale of terrifying monsters and events.

But it is actually a wonderful book that should not be avoided or ignored. For it also provides for us beautiful imagery and messages, as we read in today's reading of the saints joining together in worship before God. And it continues a tradition of apocalyptic literature that is found in the Hebrew Scriptures and was commonly understood by early followers of Christ.

The Revelation employs many of the same, wonderful symbolic features that we see in the Old Testament book of Daniel. The final form of Daniel was produced when the people of Israel were oppressed (apocalyptic literature was always written for people who were oppressed). Daniel was written to people had been conquered and were being ruled by the Empire of Greece. Their Temple in Jerusalem had been desecrated by Greeks, with the God of Israel no longer being allowed to be worshipped in that holy space; instead, an altar was to Zeus was erected there. Desecration indeed!

And those who received the Book of Revelation that we read today were people were again struggling with an oppressive empire. In their time, it was the Romans who ruled over them. Under their rule, the Temple in Jerusalem was not only desecrated, it was absolutely demolished.

In today's reading, we had symbolic language talking about four living creatures. These echo four living creatures that appear in Daniel, and

here they symbolize all of God's creatures (four being a number symbolizing the whole world, as in four corners of the earth, four winds, etc.). And they are joined with all kinds of people from “every nation, tribes, peoples, and languages” (again, notice the fourfold expression meaning all the people of the world) forming a heavenly choir that sings with all of their gusto, without masks on, and at full volume, spewing their aerosols all over the place, singing praises to God!

We are told that these are the ones who have come through “the great ordeal,” which was in the day of John’s writing the ordeal of Roman oppression. The Romans, who killed Christ, later killed many of Jesus’ followers. They required worship of local gods and even their own emperor as a God, and when many Christians refused to do this, they were killed. The Book of Revelation was written to encourage them to realize that the ordeal they were going through was not the end of the story, that God was doing something wonderful in the world, even in the midst of their suffering, and that Christ would triumph over all. This particular, fantastic revelation of God is not a bizarre vision of the future at all. It is not a terrifying Halloween scene, but a vision helping us to see realities of the connectedness of God’s people within the realm in which we live and the realm beyond us, the realm beyond time of which we are all citizens. No matter what happens to us in the present, no matter what struggles we go through, whether they are at the hands of an oppressive empire or otherwise, we know we belong to

God and God's realm, and we somehow here and are also presently in the presence of the Eternal One. We are presently eternal with a monster-conquering God, and we join with all the saints and presently praising God and enjoying perfect peace and unity with them. At this very time, we are eternally present with God and God is eternally present with us.

We celebrate this beautiful, comforting reality when we gather together to worship the eternal God, and especially when we gather together to receive the sacrament of communion, as we do today, for the sacred symbolic meal helps us to see the union we have in Christ, the union we have with one another, and the union we have with all the saints throughout time. In this union, we find comfort and strength to face the difficulties of the journeys that lie before us, whatever they may be.

And today, as we partake of the bread in the wine, may our union be strong. May the song of our hearts be these good words of the New Creed of the United Church of Canada: "In life, in death, in life beyond death, God is with us. We are not alone. Thanks be to God."

And this day, and every day, let us remember the union we share with one another as a household of faith, as we've just celebrated in the baptism of young Ricky. Let us remember the union we share with all our little ones when they join our family of faith. And let us remember

the union we maintain with the saints who have gone before us as well.
May God help us all on our journey together throughout time and
beyond time. Amen.