

## **“Overcoming the Ordeal”**

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Congregational Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts  
May 8, 2022 – Fourth Sunday of Easter  
Revelation 7:9-17; John 10:22-30

Please pray with me: “O God, take our minds and think through them, take our lips and speak through them, and take our hearts and set them on fire. Amen”  
(William Sloane Coffin).

Today’s lectionary readings continue the series of readings from this Easter season, with our first reading coming from the Book of Revelation and the gospel reading coming from John. The first reading from Revelation provides us a scene as envisioned by a person named John, who was likely the bishop, meaning the overseeing pastor, of the Christian churches of western Asia Minor, which is today the nation of Turkey, towards the end of the first century CE. The Book of Revelation, which depicts many fantastic scenes, such as today’s scene of worshipping multitudes, dressed in white, worshipping an enthroned God, is actually a letter, written by John to his flock to encourage them to remain faithful in the face of the difficulties they were facing because of their faith. John was himself facing difficulties, writing in exile on the island of Patmos, having been arrested and taken there by the Roman authorities, likely because he was considered by them to threaten the systems that they used to maintain stability and order. John, like the other Christians living in Asia Minor and throughout the empire at the end of the first century, was considered by the authorities and many of the people to be dangerous. They were called atheists as they refused to worship local gods and the gods of Greece and Rome, and their “atheism” was considered to be dangerous as those gods may become angry at all the people and cause destruction to come upon them because the bad Christians refused to pay them homage. By the end of the first century, the Roman emperor himself was considered to be one of the gods that must be worshipped, and the empire erected temples to the emperor throughout his realm, where the people were required to go to worship and state publicly, “Caesar is lord and god.” Those who worshipped the emperor received a certificate showing that they were good and faithful residents of the realm. However, those who refused to worship the emperor, like the Christians, were considered to be bad citizens and could be punished with death, which we know from correspondence between a Roman

governor in Asia Minor and the emperor was how the governing powers dealt with the faithless “atheists” when they were arrested and refused to worship Caesar as lord and god. John, as a ringleader of these bad and dangerous Christians, was considered to be *very* bad and *very* dangerous, and so was whisked away to Patmos to live in exile.

John wrote about the difficulties he and his flock faced as the great ordeal, or tribulation, and he offered his people a series of symbolic visions, in which he depicted the downfall of the Roman powers and the rising of a realm led not by a violent slayer like Caesar, but by Christ, the peaceful Lamb, who was slain by Rome. In John’s vision, the establishment of the peaceful earthly realm of Christ was not just a future hope, but a very present reality for those with spiritual eyes to see it. In this realm, God, who is the source of salvation, not Caesar, is worshipped and those who worship God, no matter their earthly circumstances, experience everything needed to live and thrive. The worshipping flock of God hunger no more and thirst no more, for they are led by the Good Shepherd by the still waters and into the green pastures, and their spirits are held and kept safe even though their bodies may be in peril or surrounded by ravenous wolves. Or as Jesus says in our reading from the gospel of John, his sheep are given life that does not perish, and they will not ever be snatched out of his life-giving and life-sustaining hand.

Our spiritual ancestors living under Roman rule are not alone in receiving this message of good news. The teaching of Jesus and the vision of John remain true from generation to generation. And we, in our time, can be sure that the modern-day Caesars who demand our allegiance and worship and will use violence and the threat of destruction to attain their selfish goals are no match for the One who sits upon the heavenly throne. And no matter the ordeals we face in life, especially the ordeals we face *because* of our faith in Christ and our ways of following in Christ’s way, we can overcome them, even if we give up our bodies in so doing, by remaining steadfast in our faith in the One who holds us.

Take hope in this when you face ordeals, especially because of your faith, knowing that the destroyers, who seem to have so much victory in our world, will not win, and cannot have victory over you if you persevere in doing what is right.

We should take hope in this as a community of faith who strive to be extravagantly welcoming and inclusive, when we find our gracious message and ways under assault -- as they are. In our current environment, in which there are many who are driven to seek and use power to elevate themselves and others who are like them at the expense of others who are dislike them, we should remain steadfast in speaking out and acting out our countering message that God dignifies all people, no matter who they are, whom they love, or where they are on life's journey. We should remain steadfast in showing one another dignity and respect as equals and supporting the establishment of just laws that promote the ability of all people to enjoy equal opportunities to thrive.

By persevering in speaking truth, doing what is right, and pushing for the good of others, especially when these are done in the face of opposition or is otherwise difficult, we can be overcomers of the ordeals of life. So let us stand firm in our faith in the peaceful Lamb, let us boldly proclaim our message of God's great love for all people, and let us enthusiastically work together to see Christ's realm of love grow on earth. Amen.