

GOOD NEWS ABOUT DEATH: The Other Side of the Curtain

Revelation 7:9-17

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WATCH/LISTEN: <https://www.fbcjc.org/sermon/the-other-side-of-the-curtain/>

I want to begin with a confession this morning, and it may change how some of you think of me, perhaps forever. Sometimes, not often, but sometimes, I skip to the end of the book. Sometimes, I google the end of a movie before watching or finishing it. I'm sorry, but I'm not sorry. The more suspenseful the story, the more likely I will take a peek at the end. The more at risk in the story, the greater my urge to know how it works out before I invest further in it. Honestly, this is why so many of us like Hallmark movies. We don't watch for their award-winning screenwriting. We watch because they're predictable with a guaranteed happy, sappy ending. No one has ever googled a Hallmark movie midway through to find out how it ends. We know.

If you've spent time on social media in the last year or two, you've probably seen a TikTok/Instagram reel with the lyric "Can we skip to the good part?" It comes from the song by the American pop band AJR. The trend on TikTok typically involved users creating short videos to share a story, show a process, or lead viewers through a series of events, all while asking the question with the song's chorus in the background, "Can we skip to the good part?" And when the song reaches its climax with that question, the video transitions to the good part – a pregnant mom finally giving birth, an adolescent who finally walks the stage for graduation, a dating couple finally walking down the aisle, someone stuck in Missouri in winter ending up on a warm beach – my personal favorite. The idea of the trend is to build anticipation and curiosity in the audience by hinting at something exciting, interesting, or fulfilling that would happen later in the video.

If we're honest, many of us like to skip to the good part. But sometimes, we can't skip. Sometimes, we shouldn't skip. But it doesn't mean we don't hold on to something hopeful and fulfilling that we believe will happen later.

II

The Book of Revelation is one of those suspenseful stories where you might want to skip to the good part or fast forward to the end. It rarely is seen as a book offering comfort, although it very much does, and Revelation certainly wouldn't be the setting for a Hallmark movie.

The book of Revelation was written in a time of great pain in the early Christian era. It was written for a church undergoing persecution and unimaginable suffering. It grapples with a world that is not as it should be. Believers were being harassed, beaten, rounded up, and killed. Revelation was written to give hope and courage to those whose worlds have come apart, and it delivers this hope through symbolic words and images that seek to convey the realities of evil, the abuse of power, the persecution of the saints, and deep injustices among empires and

rulers. It is difficult today to fully understand the symbolic language of Revelation because, as one theologian wrote, “the book tosses contrasting images like candy at a parade.” There are beasts and angels, a lake of fire and strange-looking creatures, and lots of blood. Seven seals are broken, each bringing unthinkable terror and death. The seals – or envelopes – are the tragedies of military conquest, violence, famine, war, disease, death, and cosmic disorder like earthquakes.

And just before the seventh and final seal is opened, when we think we can’t stand any more pain or feel we can’t handle any more catastrophic news, you get a short TikTok video helping us skip to the good part. That is our text today – the good part.

III

Amid stories of terror and pain amid visions of monsters and lakes of fire, the sounds of singing swell around us as we find ourselves in the heavenly realm. John, the writer of Revelation, describes a glorious moment where countless faithful people who have lived through the great ordeal and died are now with Christ. They are robed in white and singing praises to God. Imagine an endless sea of white robes, Christians bruised and beaten by life, who spent their days in fear of persecution, now singing and worshipping. Angels encircle them and join in the chorus. It is almost as if we have been able to flip ahead in the story and fast forward to the movie's end so we might find a brief glimpse of how things will end. Now, for those who aren't fans of singing, do not fear. This vision doesn't mean you are singing in a heavenly choir for the rest of eternity. Worship of God is expressed in many ways, and worship is the heart behind the vision. Those who have been through a great ordeal and are now with Christ are moved to worship God in response to God's greatness, goodness, and salvation.

The scene John describes is a place of unbelievable abundance. The worship swells. The crowd swells. Neither the worship nor the crowd of saints can be counted or contained. The diverse saints come from all tribes and all peoples and all languages. There will be no sign saying, “English only.” The nations, standing before the throne and the Lamb, cry in a loud, unified voice, “Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne and to the Lamb!” And all the heavenly beings join them in the worship of God, “Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom ... to our God forever and ever! (v. 12)

Then, as we read beginning in verse 13, “One of the elders addresses John, saying, “Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?” I said to him, “Sir, you are the one who knows.” Then he said to me, “These are they who have come out of a great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. For this reason, they are before the throne of God and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them. They will hunger no more and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat, for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

The abundance continues as physical, emotional and spiritual needs are fully met. There will be no more hunger or thirst. There will be no more tears. There will be no more injustices or wrongs. Those who toil under the sun will be protected from the scorching heat. There will be springs of life-giving water for all that our Shepherd will lead us to, restoring, protecting, and meeting every need. We will lack nothing, just as Psalm 23 teaches us.

What a good vision to skip to for hope when we're living amid trials. This vision from John is not bookmarked at the end of Revelation. It comes after six seals of terror, and before the seventh, final seal of more terror arrives. It is a reprieve amid pain, a glimmer of hope amid the darkness; heaven is breaking into our world with promise, power, and possibilities.

IV

The other day, I was walking at the Runge Nature Center in one of the more heavily wooded areas. As I walked, I noticed the sun peeking in and out of the trees, like playing a game of hide-in-seek. I stopped and took this short video of the sun coming in and out of the trees. There was just enough of a chill that day that I could feel the sun's warmth touching my skin each time the sun appeared, and I felt its absence when it went back behind the trees.

In Celtic Christianity, there is a saying, "Heaven and earth are only three feet apart. But in the thin places, the distance is even shorter." Rev. Kristin Adkins said that for early Christians in Scotland and Ireland, these thin places were where heaven seemed so close to earth that you could almost see through the veil separating them. They would mark such spots with stone circles and later with churches and cemeteries.ⁱ

This is what I felt on that walk, the thin place. It is what I feel often when I'm in the beauty of the created world. I also feel it with beloved saints as they enter their final hours before death. The space, the room, becomes holy ground, a thin place where heaven seems so close to us you could almost see through the veil separating us.

We cannot go there yet. But there are so many more moments around us than we realize where God's Spirit lets us peek at the end of the book or skip to the good part, not as an escape from our present reality but to renew our hope and strengthen us for living in this world, being the people of God in this time and place. God reminds us of the world God is creating in partnership with us, a world Jesus announced when he walked among us, a new heaven and earth God will bring to its full completion in God's time, not ours. Until then, we have a vision, a glimpse of the hope to come, so we might persevere in the work God has called us to without fear of what is to come.

V

In 1 Corinthians 15, the Apostle Paul writes about the great mystery of life and death and life beyond death. He says in verse 54, "When this perishable body puts on perishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled: "Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?"

...Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved brothers and sisters, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.” (V. 54-58)

Our labor is not in vain. We are to be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord. If you're not dead, you're not done. And, when the journey gets hard, the days are dark, or the grief is heavy, we remember we do not labor in vain. Death has been swallowed up in victory, forever defeated by Jesus Christ. Christ has already put this new reality in motion through his resurrection from the dead. So, let us not be afraid or discouraged. Let us not be overcome by this world. Take heart; Christ has overcome the world. We've been given a vision, a peek at the end of the story, and we've been able to skip to the good part momentarily so that we might be people of hope and confidence, steadfast, immovable, excelling in the work of the Lord.

VI

When I skip to the end of a book or google the ending of a movie and see that things will be okay, it allows me to return to where I left off and continue the story with peace. I'm more present than I was before when I was worried about the ending. Perhaps the same might be true for us as believers. Life is hard and painful. Last week was my 23rd funeral this year. I have another one this Wednesday. All funerals involve grief, but some have more pain than others. Deep pain. The only way I can stand up in front of those grieving families is because I am confident in how the story ends. While we have trials, painful separation, and suffering now, these things will not have the final word. Christ has the final word. Until then, I want to seek and reveal the thin places, the places and moments when God's kingdom is breaking through among us, not from some far-away celestial city in the sky, but from the very presence of God in us, with us, around us, and among us.

We do not know where our lives will take us, all we will face, or how long we have. We cannot skip to the good parts or past the chapters and scenes that are hard to read and watch. There are more questions than answers about what existence looks like on the other side of the curtain. But we've been given a glimpse to encourage and sustain us, to give us hope. And believing what we believe, we've been invited to live within that good news about death. As Brian Erickson puts it, we're invited to join the saints who have gone before us, who have shaped us into the people we are, who are saving us a seat at the banquet table of the Messiah, and who call us now to a life of hope, of daring to believe that, as they now know with certainty, death and pain do not have the final word.

This means worshipping, even in the wreckage of this war-torn world.ⁱⁱ It means that as Scripture says, “we do not grieve as those who have no hope.” It means seeing what the world cannot see and, through the power of God's Spirit and the work of God's grace, doing our part to help make it visible to all for the glory of God and the good of the world. Amen.

All scripture quoted is from the NRSVUE unless otherwise noted.

ⁱ Rev. Dr. Kristin Adkins Whitesides sermon, <https://vimeo.com/877619754>

ⁱⁱ *A Preacher's Guide to Lectionary Sermon Series*, 76