

Don't Put a Period, Where God Will Put a Comma

3rd Sunday of Easter

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North East United Methodist Church

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After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could count, from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, and palm branches were in their hands; and they cry out with a loud voice, saying,

"Salvation to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb." And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures; and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying,

"Amen, blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might, be to our God forever and ever. Amen."

Then one of the elders answered, saying to me, "These who are clothed in the white robes, who are they, and where have they come from?" I said to him, "My lord, you know." And he said to me, "These are the ones who come out of the great tribulation, and 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 they serve Him day and night in His temple; and He who sits on the throne will spread His tabernacle over them. They will hunger no longer, nor thirst anymore; nor will the sun beat down on them, nor any heat; for the Lamb in the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and will guide them to springs of the water of life; and God will wipe every tear from their eyes."

-Revelation 7:9-17

It is believed John received his revelation and wrote down what he saw to the seven churches in the Roman province of Asia around 95 AD during the reign of the Emperor Domitian. Domitian demanded that people worship him and great persecution erupted against Christians during his reign. It is believed that during Domitian's reign a law was enacted that stated, *"That no Christian, once brought before the tribunal, should be exempted from punishment without renouncing his*

religion." Numerous martyrs suffered during Domitian's reign including Simeon, bishop of Jerusalem, who was crucified, and Timothy, disciple of Paul and bishop of Ephesus, who was beaten to death with clubs.

But in the midst of this persecution, God shares with His people, through John, words of encouragement.

V. 9-10 - *"After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could count, from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, and palm branches were in their hands; and they cried out with a loud voice, saying, 'Salvation to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.'"*

John is telling the church that those who have endured persecution and suffering... those who have experienced hurt and pain... will experience a glory in the end that will be worth all the suffering.

Paul had spoken this message in Romans 8:18, *"I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us."*

John then writes... V. 13-14... *"Then one of the elders answered, saying to me, 'These who are clothed in the white robes, who are they, and where have they come from?' I said to him, 'My lord, you know.'"*

"And he said to me... V. 14... 'These are the ones who come out of the great tribulation, and they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.'"

There are theologians that believe this verse refers to the Great Tribulation that Jesus referred to in Matthew 24:21. Jesus said, *"For at that time there will be great suffering, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be."* Some believe the great suffering Jesus is referring to is the persecution the early church would face under Emperors like Domitian...others see Jesus projecting forward through time to the end...the opening of seven seals, the coming of the four horsemen of the Apocalypse...conquest, war, famine, and death...the final battle between good and evil...the final judgment and Christ's return...

But many theologians believe the Great Tribulation refers to much more. The Greek word used here for tribulation...thlibo...can be defined as tribulation but also affliction, anguish, persecution, or trouble...

V. 14 - *"The ones who come out of the great tribulation" ... "come" is in present tense...and some have translated this verse as those who "continue to come" or "are still arriving" ... "out of the great tribulation"...*

Thus, many see the whole history of the church from the its beginnings and the persecutions under Emperor Domitian and others...to the affliction placed on many believers around the world today...to tomorrow and the final battle between good and evil, when Christ will return to usher in His kingdom...they see the whole history of the church as a time of tribulation...So the great tribulation spoken of here is, many believe, the battle each of us as men and women of faith face each and every day.

We live in a world filled with heartache, poverty, war, violence, financial burdens, upheaval... John 16:33 - Jesus said, *"...In this world you will have trouble. BUT take heart! I have overcome the world."*

This is the message of John's vision. First, look at those who have come out of *"tribulation."* Verse 14 - One of the elders standing around the throne of God tells John, *"These are the ones who come out of the great tribulation, and they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb."*

The scriptures says, *"...they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb." "...they have washed..."* In the midst of the world we live in, in the midst of the tribulations we face, we must take hold of Christ and His sacrifice for ourselves. This is the part we play in our salvation.

Jesus and what He did on the cross...His act and His act alone saves us, redeems us...but we must grasp, embrace, what He did for ourselves. We do this through repentance...having true sorrow for our sin, our mistakes...wanting to make amends. We do this through faith...believing with all our heart that Christ lived and died for us...through His sacrifice our sins are forgiven. We do this through obedience...following Christ...confessing Him not only as Savior but as Lord...allowing Him to lead us, to be our Master and Guide in all things.

Those who do this...who accept God's gift in His son, Jesus Christ...who stay faithful in the midst of a turbulent world, in the midst of the *"great tribulation"* we

and the Church are living through...who stand against evil and fight temptation until the day "*Christ returns and we feast at a heavenly banquet*"...Listen to what those who do this...who remain faithful through the afflictions...the troubles...the anguish...the persecutions...will receive...

V. 15-17 - "*For this reason, they are before the throne of God; and they serve Him day and night in His temple; and He who sits on the throne will spread His tabernacle over them. They will hunger no longer, nor thirst anymore; nor will the sun beat down on them, nor any heat; for the Lamb in the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and will guide them to springs of the water of life; and God will wipe every tear from their eyes.*"

Those who have been faithful will have entry into the very presence of God.

What a promise! If we stay faithful, stay focused on God, in the midst of the tribulations of this world...if we keep centered on Christ...the promises of Jesus will come true for us...

God's promises for all who remain faithful through heartache and tribulation, through persecution and times of trouble...God's promise...it will end...God's children will have victory...V. 9-10 - "*After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could count, from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, and palm branches were in their hands; and they cry out with a loud voice, saying, 'Salvation to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.'*"

On May 18, 1980, a 5.1 magnitude earthquake from within Mount St. Helens triggered the collapse of the mountain's north flank, releasing the largest landslide in recorded history and a volcanic eruption equal in power to 500 atom bombs. As much as a cubic mile of volcanic material shot upward and sideways. The lateral blast traveled at more than 300 miles per hour with temperatures in excess of 600 degrees F, destroying 230 square miles of forest. Within seconds, the trunks of thousands of 150-foot-tall old-growth Douglas firs snapped like toothpicks. Ash rained down over 22,000 square miles, blew more than 12 miles into the atmosphere and circled the globe in 17 days. When the ash finally cleared, the mountain was reduced by 1,313 feet.

Although the Forest Service and local authorities had worked diligently to keep visitors away, 57 people were killed. Rock, snow and ice roared down the mountain at speeds more than 100 miles per hour. Most large mammals on Mount

St. Helens – mountain goats, black bears, and thousands of elk and deer as well as most fish, amphibians, insects and birds – perished.

The mountain was literally reduced to ashes...

Yet...Out of the ashes there has been rebirth and renewal. Within the crater a new lava dome began rising in 1986, rebuilding the mountain. A new glacier has established itself on the crater floor. And since early October 2004, a second lava dome has grown at a rate as high as a dump-truck load in volume every second. At this rate, scientists estimate Mount St. Helens could return to its height before the 1980 eruption of 9,677 feet in less than 200 years – less than a blink of the eye in geologic time.

Remarkably, plant and animal life has reestablished itself far faster than expected. Beetles were among the earliest animals to return and over 300 kinds now flourish. Lupines, members of the pea family, were among the first plants to grow in the deep deposits of volcanic ash. Scientists learned that lupines drive ecological recovery by creating islands of rich nutrients that promote establishment of other plant species. Millions of new trees, elk, deer, cougars, bobcats, bears, birds and fish have also returned to the areas so profoundly altered in 1980.

”Never put a period where God is ready to put a comma...”

John's vision reminds us...*”Never put a period where God is ready to put a comma”*...John's vision reminds us when we face tribulations and troubles and afflictions of any sort, it is not the end...it is simply an interruption, a bump on the journey...and it may hurt...it may be extremely painful...it may appear as if all hope is lost...we may feel we have come to the end of the sentence...but God says, “No, let us put a comma here and see what happens next.”

Yesterday, we celebrated with one of my son's best friends, Garrett, who leaves this week to go into the Navy. As I hugged him and said “goodbye,” it hurt. Over the last year, everything has changed in our lives...children getting married, moving out, moving on...no more soccer games and sleepovers...empty nest... Deb and I, our life looks very different then it did a year ago...I know many of you have been where we are...But God says, *“Don't put a period here...its not over...I am putting a comma...there is new life ahead...yes, its changing...but it is not ending...and because I am God...what will be...is GOOD.”*

A story is told about an elderly lady who was greatly disturbed by her many troubles--both real and imaginary. Finally, someone in her family tactfully told her, "*Grandma, we've done all we can for you. You'll just have to trust God for the rest.*" A look of absolute despair spread over her face as she replied, "*Oh dear, has it come to that?*"

The thing is..."*It always comes to that, so we might as well begin with that!*"

Martin Luther wrote, "*The supreme blessing in which one can truly know the goodness of God is not temporal possessions, but the eternal blessing that God has called us to--His holy gospel. In this gospel we hear that God will be gracious to us for the sake of His Son, will forgive and eternally save us, and will protect us in this life against the tyranny of the Devil and the world. To someone who properly appreciates this blessing, everything else is a trifle. Though he is poor, sick, despised, and burdened with adversities, he sees that he keeps more than he has lost. If he has no money and goods, he knows nevertheless that he has a gracious God; if his body is sick, he knows that he is called to eternal life. His heart has this constant consolation: Only a short time, and everything will be better.*"

I know there are many people here...many people we know...who are going through things...who are carrying burdens...some small...some huge...people who are grieving...who are confused...those who at times want to cry...who aren't sure how they are going to get through tomorrow...

Perhaps you feel like your finances are in ashes..."*I am the resurrection and the life...*" Perhaps you feel like you've been "burned to a crisp" by another, hurt and stepped on..."*I am the resurrection and the life...*" Perhaps you feel like you can't change...the "fire" is gone...the passion has faded..."*I am the resurrection and the life...*" Perhaps you feel your marriage, your health, your prayer life, your work... out of the ashes..."*I am the resurrection and the life...*"

Perhaps you are shouting to the heavens...like the psalmist you are shouting, "*Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord...Lord, hear my voice...*"..."*I am the resurrection and the life...*" Yes, I know...but I need help with this..."*I am the resurrection and the life...*" Ok, but I need an answer...I'm praying...help me... where should I turn..."*I am the resurrection and the life...*" What is the answer, Lord...what is the answer..."*I AM...*"

God says, “*Don't put a period, where I am about to put a comma' ... Trust in me... 'I am the resurrection and life' ... I will bring you through the storm... I will raise you up... I will give you healing, new life, and purpose... and one day... you will see... as John describes... V. 9-10 - 'a great multitude which no one could count, from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues' ... and you will be part of that multitude 'standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, and palm branches in [your] hands... cry[ing] out with a loud voice, 'Salvation to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.'*”