

November 5, 2017
Glimpsing Heaven in Thin Places
Revelation 7:11-17
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On the coasts of Scotland and Ireland there are certain sites that people call “thin places.” Thin places are not so named because the altitude is any higher or the air is any thinner. Rather, in these places the distance between heaven and earth shrinks, and the veil between the two worlds is so “thin” you can actually perceive something of heaven itself. The ancient Celts built many of their worship places on these thin places. Later Christians also built churches and monasteries and cemeteries there. People who visit these sites today sometimes say they lose all track of time and space. They know, deep down inside, they are on holy ground. For in thin places, boundaries of time and space fade away. There is no yesterday, today or tomorrow, only eternity stretching forth in a timeless continuum.

Today when we are celebrating All Saints Sunday, it is good to visit the thin places, as we think about our loved ones who now dwell in the world beyond this one. I think John, the author of Revelation, must have been someone who visited the thin places of the ancient world. His writings are full of mystery and wonder. In today’s text the author invites us to join in glimpsing something of heaven itself!

I have often heard people say that we are going to be surprised by the people we meet in heaven. If John's vision is an accurate one, it will definitely be so. John begins this chapter (Rev. 7) by talking about all the people from the twelve tribes of Israel who will be there. And then John broadens the vision even further, saying that in heaven there will be people gathered from every single nation and tribe and language on earth, all giving praise to the Lamb who sits on the throne. I'm guessing that many of them will surprise us by their presence there.

I have a feeling that we're all going to be surprised by who is sitting at the Lamb's eternal banquet table with us in heaven. Surely we will see people there we considered unforgivable, unredeemable. We will see people against whom we have long held grudges or prejudices. We will see people from nations we branded with the label “enemy.” We will see people we failed to even meet in this life because of their poverty, disease, or station in life. They will all be there.

When we look through John's veil, what we see is that heaven is actually a very active place. What is it people are busy doing? They are worshiping and serving God and others. This is the very same thing that gave them the greatest joy, the greatest meaning, in their life here on earth. John saw that people of every tongue and tribe and nation gathered around the throne of the Lamb, saying, *“Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever.”* (Rev. 7:12) Heaven is a worshipping kind of place!

We're also going to be surprised in heaven by the scope of healing we will encounter there. I know that most of us think of heaven as a place of personal healing. And what a comfort it is to know that our loved ones, many of whom have suffered great physical or mental or emotional illness in this life, will be completely whole in the life to come. The healing in heaven will be far broader than that of our own personal lives and the lives of our loved ones. For heaven is also a place where all the injustices of this world will finally be made right, where the lowly will be lifted up, the mighty brought low. Heaven is where God's vision of a community of justice and peace and equality will finally hold sway. In today’s text John says, *“the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water.”* *‘And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.’* (Rev. 7:17) The healing that goes on in heaven will be a healing not only of body, mind, and spirit, but a healing of the entire social order.

Do you have any thin places in your own life? Do you have places where you have the sure sense that you are standing on holy ground, communing with the saints who have gone before you? You don't have to travel far to find such thin places. Indeed, this time of worship itself would be a thin place as we feel like we are standing on holy ground, and the veil between heaven and earth grows strangely thin.

Today is a day for the thin places. So wherever you are, whatever you are doing, take off your shoes. For the ground upon which you are standing may well be holy. If we open ourselves to the Spirit, the same Spirit who allowed John a glimpse into heaven itself, we may find ourselves transported to a place where the boundaries between this world and the world to come fade away. We will be where we sense our unity not only with God, but with all the saints who dwell with God in glory. Thanks be to God!