

Rejoice! Rejoice!
Revelation 7:9-17
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First Central Congregational UCC
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In May 2007 my first nephew Jacob Randall Adams was born. That day, I had the luxury of holding him for a couple of hours while his parents napped. I hummed hymn tunes to him. He seemed to like the tune to “Abide with Me” the best.

I wrote Jacob a little letter on the occasion of his birth – something to go in his baby book for him to read years from now. In the letter I told him about his mommy and our relationship when she was a baby. I can’t remember if I included the story about the time she rode over me on her tricycle while I was napping on the floor. I probably left that out.

I also wrote in the letter telling him a little bit about myself and offered to be there to help him if he needed anything. I told him that I was preacher, which meant that I helped people in their relationship with God. I wrote that I had dedicated my life to the “way of God,” which meant making the world a better place. Then I told him a quote that has inspired my ministry, “Live so that when children think of kindness, caring, and service, they think of you.”

That quote, by the way, hangs in my office as a daily reminder. It is surrounded by a bunch of things that the children of First Central have created for me. Including one pencil drawing of me holding a Bible and wearing a big hat that says “Minister.” In that particular drawing I’m speaking and my words are “Bla, bla, bla, bla church stuff, bla, bla, bla.”

No child gave me that drawing; Sara found it in a pew one Monday morning. At least, I think it is a child’s drawing.

In his commentary on this passage from Revelation, the great Scottish Bible scholar William Barclay writes:

[The one] who faithfully works and witnesses for God has always the glory of God upon his work; work when it is done for God is . . . clad with the . . . glory of God.

Barclay insists that we can live and work “in the very . . . radiance of the glory of God.”

Holding my newborn nephew was one of those moments when the radiant glory of God was quite tangible. When you are holding a newborn, who is quiet and napping, everything about the world makes sense. There’s no anxiety over the meaning of life, no fear about our own work or worth. In a moment like that all our effort and struggle seem to have been for some purpose, seem to have been worth it. We are striving to make the world a good place for our children, for those who come after us.

David May writes that this passage in Revelation is about the “promised reward for patient endurance of and resistance to the coercive powers of the present age.”

Those who first heard the Book of Revelation were faced with a decision—to obey the dictates of the Roman Empire or to be faithful to their beliefs in God as revealed in Jesus. John wrote this letter in order to encourage them to endure, to remain steadfast, for their ultimate triumph awaited them. John was confident that they would be victorious because he firmly believed that in Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection the powers of this world and all the evil they represent had already been defeated.

And now God is making the power and the glory of the resurrected Christ available to us. This message is conveyed in images—the robes washed in the blood of the lamb or the tent of God sheltering the people (another reference to the Tabernacle, by the way).

Salvation is the theme here, but not simply an otherworldly salvation, an afterlife surrounding the throne of God. Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza writes, "According to [the Book of] Revelation, final salvation does not just pertain to the soul and spiritual realities. It is the abolishment of all dehumanization and suffering and at the same time the fullness of human well-being."

When we share in God's power and glory, we are saved. Which includes our empowerment here and now. The glory of God shines through us and our work.

But it doesn't mean that the work is any easier. In fact, it might even get more difficult. Living a good and faithful life of service, care, and sacrifice will run counter to many of the forces in this world who will try to tempt us away from righteousness or even openly challenge us.

Recently I was talking with our congregant, Dr. Phil Smith, about the discrimination he and his team have faced. Dr. Smith is in charge of the infectious disease unit at UNMC which has treated the three Ebola patients. Phil told me that every person in his unit, including himself, has faced some discrimination by other people who are afraid that they will get infected. His team's good work healing other people, something which benefits all of humanity, has earned them suspicion from some who are ill-informed. That is sad, and a reminder of how fear and ignorance can infect humanity, leading us away from the enlightenment that comes from truth and goodness.

(By the way, our congratulations go out to Phil and his team and all the other Ebola fighters around the world who shared this week in the honor of being named *Time* magazine's Persons of the Year.)

In the face of opposition and difficulty, we are encouraged to persevere and overcome because our work is not in vain. Our work radiates with the glory of God as it contributes to a better world.

Then we read those encouraging words: "They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat. . . [they will be guided] to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

Of these verses, William Barclay writes:

But it may well be that we should not entirely spiritualize this passage and this promise. In the days of the early Church so many of the Church's members were slaves. They knew what it was to be ill-fed and hungry all the time. They knew what thirst was. They knew what it was for the pitiless sun to blaze down upon their backs as they toiled, forbidden to rest. . . . The greatness of this passage is that out of its promise a [person]

can take that which his heart most yearns for. It is the promise that in Christ is the end of the world's hunger, the world's pain, and the world's sorrow.

Occasionally, in the midst of all our busy-ness and stress, all our fears and doubts, our labor and perseverance, the light breaks through, and we see the true purpose and meaning of the good life that God intends for us. And in those moments we realize that all our work has meaning, in that it participates in and radiates with God's glory.

Holding my nephew Jacob, on the day of his birth, was one of those moments for me.

Rejoice! For a child will be born unto us, and that child will be the light of the world. Rejoice! And be not afraid.