

“GOD’S GOT A RESCUE PLAN”

Pastor Becky Stephens

Text: Revelation 7:9-17

God has a rescue plan!
Did you hear me, GOD HAS A RESCUE PLAN!

Initially, I had a problem with the Noah’s Ark story. Not that I didn’t believe it happened, but that God would flood the Earth sparing only one man’s family. How could our loving Father watch as His people drown? Men, women, and children gasping for breath as stormy waves suffocated them. The Bible says God was fed up with the wickedness in Noah’s generation. It just came time when enough was enough.

God saw that human evil was out of control. People thought evil, imagined evil – evil from morning to night. God was sorry that He made the human race in the first place; it broke His heart. God said, “I’ll get rid of my ruined creation, make a clean sweep... I’m sorry I made them.” (Genesis 6:5-7)

At first, I could not understand why God would just kill everyone. No second chances? The God of forgiveness I know wiped them out?

As far as God was concerned, the Earth had become a sewer; there was violence everywhere. God took one look and saw how bad it was, everyone corrupt and corrupting – life itself corrupt to the core. (Genesis 6:11-12)

Soon I realized I didn’t see the full plan. God offers humankind a second chance through Noah’s lineage. We are on this Earth only by God’s grace. He didn’t totally give up on His creation. He has given us a reprieve—yet another chance.

The flood acts as a reminder that He judges sin. His standards are still high, too high for us to obtain. In our own strength, we cannot help ourselves. God knew that, so He sent His Son to save us.

Noah wasn’t without sin. No one is, except one. Jesus Christ, God’s Son, was entirely blameless, yet died a criminal’s death. He hung on a cross because it was part of our rescue plan. It may seem unjust for a father to send His only son to death for crimes Jesus did not commit. But, that’s just it. God shows His mercy through the death of His Son.

We are all human and incapable of living perfect lives. Even those who try to do good and are honest and loving people are slaves to sin because we can never be blameless. Greed, pride, hate – these are sins we all have committed.

But God has a rescue plan!

Remember the Uni-bomber--Ted Kaczynski? Ted grew up as a very gifted young man, who had been loved dearly by his mother. He became a math professor, but was soon disillusioned and moved to the mountains of Montana. He would sometimes come down from the mountains to send mail bombs to people he didn't like. After years of investigation, he was finally discovered by police and sent to prison. Not only did Ted cause tremendous pain to strangers and others--his actions just about crushed his mother who loved him.

Several years ago, his mother was interviewed by a reporter from the Chicago Tribune. At the time she had been writing monthly letters to her son in prison. She shared with the reporter what she had written in her most recent letter. She wrote: "I want you to know, Ted, that when a child is born, the parents give them the gift of unconditional love for a lifetime. This is true for you. No matter what happens, my love for you will be there for a lifetime. Love, Mother." Even after he had refused to look at her when he entered the courtroom during his trial, even after he had given testimony in court that described her as a horrible person, she still loved him enough to write those monthly letters. She never gave up on him.

This is exactly the kind of love God has for us. Even when our love fails, His love is proven true. It is always there. Always active. God's love for us is so strong that even when we fall short, God still writes us love letters. Because God loves us, He provides for us a rescue plan.

What are you going through this morning? Is there pain in your heart that is nearly unmanageable? Has someone hurt you deeply? Are you suffering from an illness, a disease? Do you have a daily battle with depression and anxiety? Are you weeping over the state of our world? Are you hitting the wall right now--feeling like you can't go on, like you'll never make it?

In our Scripture Lesson for this morning from Revelation Chapter 7 we are told about a "great multitude" of people "that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne [of God] and in front of the Lamb (Who is Jesus)." We are told that "they were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: 'Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.'"

We are also told that the multitudes seen praising God and wearing white robes are followers of Jesus Christ. "These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb."

The word for "tribulation" can also be translated as "persecution."

And although John, in this passage may be speaking about a specific period of persecution associated with the Second Coming of Christ...a careful study of how the term "persecution" is used in Revelation and the rest of the New Testament reveals that, as Christians, we all experience persecutions when we live as faithful disciples of Jesus Christ in the world.

"Then one of the elders asked me, 'These in white robes--who are they, and where did they come from?' I answered, 'Sir you know.' And he said, 'These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.'"

While on this earth, there can be no doubt that pain and suffering will be a part of any Christian's life. If this were not the case; it would mean our hearts were so hardened to the pain of this world that it would be impossible to actually be following Christ. Christ weeps when He sees people weeping. God so loved the world that He came to us in Christ and has shared in our suffering!!! And as Christ-followers, we share in the suffering of the world as well.

We are to be troubled by the fact that so many persons are living without hope, without the knowledge that they are loved. We are to be disturbed that so many people are angry, filled with hatred, and low self-esteem. And we are to be disturbed as well--extremely disturbed--if we are not doing something to help alleviate the problems!!!...if we are not part of God's 'rescue effort.'

"Those standing before the throne and before the Lamb have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb." They are in need of shelter. They have known hunger and thirst and scorching heat. They have tears in their eyes. Suffering has always been part of the Christian story. However, it is only part of the story and never THE END.

This passage in Revelation moves us through its important message about suffering to a vision of how victory is finally won!!! And this victory is so different than the visions of victory offered to us by our culture; our world:

"The one with the most toys wins."

"The one with the most money and the biggest house wins."

"The one with the most power wins."

Baloney!!! None of these definitions of victory are the truth!!!

For in reality, ultimate Christian victory comes in death. When we die with Christ--to self, that is--we rise with Christ; this is how we become Victors!!! We are conquerors, not because we escape persecution--Christ didn't escape it. We are conquerors because when we rise with Christ, right here and right now--when we allow our garments to be washed with the blood of the Lamb--we become Children of God--children not born of flesh and blood, or of a parent's will--but Children born of God!!!! The word "salvation" literally means "rescue." And God's rescue plan is found only in the life, death, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ!!!

Have you allowed God to rescue you from slavery to sin, death and hell? Have you washed your robe and made it white in the "blood of the Lamb"? Will you be found praising God in ecstasy, thanksgiving and praise forever and ever? Will you be one of the "multitudes" standing "before the throne [of God] and in front of the Lamb"? Will you, be in heaven, in the company of all the angels, the apostles and the saints...will you be one of the one's who falls down on their face "before the throne" worshiping God and saying, "Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!"? Will Jesus, the Lamb of God, be your Shepherd? Will He lead you to springs of living water? Will God "wipe away every tear" from your eyes?

Drew Sappington shared the following story in this month's Upper Room devotional:

"I did not feel much like I had an immortal soul and did not have much confidence that I would rise to eternal life when medical tests revealed that I had cancer. But...I found that I believed strongly in the resurrection of Jesus. And because Jesus rose, I had reason to believe that he would rescue me from death as well. Out of gratitude, I began to pray more regularly. Perhaps because of my weak faith, I did not pray for a cure of my cancer; but I did take time to praise God each day for what I had. Sometimes as chemotherapy and radiation took their toll, my prayers were little more than coherent babbling. But with the aid of the Spirit, I kept on praying. I endured months of treatments, underwent three major operations, and had a colostomy for a while.

My father died while I was going through all this. At the end of that awful time, my wife said, 'That must have been the worst year of your life.' I thought about that for a minute, and I realized that throughout those difficult days I had been comforted with a profound sense of Christ's presence. 'You know,' I told her, 'it may have been the best.'" Sappington finishes with: "Knowing Christ is with us transforms us and our struggles."

Do you know Christ is with you? With Jesus, even the worst of circumstances can be the best. In the game of chess, the purpose is to "checkmate" your opponent's king in a situation where it can't avoid being captured in the next move. In many games of chess, a point comes when one player makes a move luring the opponent in to something called "a mating net." Usually, this kind of move is a sacrificial one; it gives your opponent the opportunity to capture one of your major pieces, or to gain what appears to be the advantageous position on the board. If your opponent takes the bait, the "mating set" is set. The victor will be losing pieces to the loser, and the loser will appear to still have every possibility of winning. But this is a false perspective. The "losses" of the winner are an integral part of the ultimate victory that has already been assured and the "victories" of the loser are, in reality, the sequence of defeats that lead to ultimate destruction.

In the Cross of Jesus, God makes the sacrificial move that "sets the mating net." God's victory is established at that point, even though history continues...the forces of evil still attack us and seem to thwart God's purposes. As Christians, we still find ourselves pressed in on every side. What the enemy, and what those who do not know Christ--do not know, however...is that the victory has already been won and everything will be made right when Christ's returns and there is a new heaven and a new earth.

So the big question for us now is: "Will we be part of God's rescue effort?" Will we allow the light of Christ, and the good news of Christ to flow from us and out into a world that is so lost, so dark, so insanely broken?

There is great meaning to our lives after-all!!! And that is because: Christ has won the victory!!! And Jesus is with us at all times. Knowing Christ is with us transforms us, our struggles and those with whom we come in contact.

How can we not cry out in a loud voice:

"Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb...Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!"