

First Presbyterian Church  
Bozeman, Montana  
Jody McDevitt, co-pastor

April 25, 2010  
4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter  
Revelation 7:9-17

### Comfort

Dana Ferguson was an associate pastor at Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago. She was a bright and rising star in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Most of her ministry there was focused on mission, reaching out to the Chicago community and all its needs, but her administrative gifts were so numerous that she was named “executive associate pastor,” which means that she was in charge of the 100+ staff members at that church of more than 5000 members. She was young and vibrant, smart and committed to her ministry. Her husband was also a minister, and they had twin sons. She wrote a commentary about today’s reading from Revelation:

We Christians are wont to imagine that God’s job is to keep us and our loved ones safe from harm. This misguided belief causes more lives of faith to crumble than any other I have known. Today’s vision from Revelation to John clearly lets us know that pain and suffering will be part of any Christian life.

*(Feasting On the Word, Year C, Vol 2, Westminster John Knox Press, 2009 p. 438)*

And shortly after writing this, before the book was ever published, she died of heart failure in October 2008, a complication of the cancer treatments she had received a few years earlier. She was 42 years old when she died.

The huge Gothic church on Michigan Avenue in downtown Chicago was overflowing for her funeral. The gathered congregation did what they do every Sunday—they stood to sing the Doxology, recite the Apostles’ Creed, to sing and pray and hear scripture, and repeat together the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, laughing at memories shared and crying as they were touched by Dana’s life and Christ’s resurrection promise. When the service ended, a bagpiper led the processional out of the church, down the long, long center aisle, the casket followed by the church’s pastoral staff, and her family, including the two seven-year-old boys. But the church’s brass ensemble had the last number, a counterpoint to the formal tradition. They played “Just a Closer Walk With Thee,” in what one parishioner described as “a boozy, ragtime arrangement that made us all erupt in bursts of giggles and clapping.” And that parishioner comments, “It was her final joke.” (Blog of Delia Christina, “Screed” 11/1/2008)

I believe that Dana Ferguson’s funeral service echoed Revelation 7 with its proclamation of joyful praise in the face of suffering and death. I think she understood this vision of the saints in heaven so well not because of her degree from Princeton Theological Seminary, and not because she was asked to write a commentary on it from her vantage point as a pastor, but because she personally faced her mortality as a young woman with a life-threatening disease. It wasn’t her scholarly research that gave her insight as much as her experience as an advocate for the poor, the homeless, the needy, the suffering people of Chicago and prior to that, Memphis, Tennessee. And because she lived such a full and deep life following Jesus, because in that short life she wrestled with life’s most difficult questions and challenges head on, because she kept faith and trusted God all the way to the end, she wanted those who were grieving her early death to depart with a note of joy. Though her body was being carried in a casket, she was walking with Jesus. She was, and

she is, singing with the saints in eternity. And she wanted her friends and family to join her in the everlasting, heavenly song, a song that laughs in the face of death.

In our series of sermons from Revelation, let me be frank: we are skipping over the weirdest parts of the book. It's not that we're cowards. But thankfully, the lectionary chooses to include only the most accessible portions of the Revelation, the parts which all of us can "get" without becoming biblical scholars first. If you were here last week, you heard me give my 5-word synopsis of the whole thing: "IN THE END, GOD WINS." That's the theme of the vision of heaven in chapter 5, and it's the theme behind chapter 7, too. In between these two is a vision of four different colored horses and their riders, followed by a vision of long-suffering martyrs and then an earthquake and what appears to be the coming of the Day of the Lord—but like I said, thankfully we are skipping over that and going straight to another vision of heaven, eternity, life everlasting in the presence of God. The strangest parts of the Revelation, that is, the parts which stretch the imagination the farthest with the most obscure symbolism and bizarre images, comes after chapter 7. But today we get to celebrate the glorious vision of eternal life with all the saints, praising God, praising Christ, forever and ever, Amen!

It is an innumerable crowd, greater than ever gathered at Bobcat Stadium for a Cats-Griz game, larger than the thousands who pack the biggest college bowl game, bigger than the biggest city on earth all assembled for a grand celebration. And they are from every nation, male and female, all tribes and colors and peoples and languages. Yet they worship together, proclaiming in some heavenly tongue blessing and honor and glory and power to God and to the Lamb. They sing and they fall on their faces and they worship. They wear white robes, a symbol that their suffering is past and they are clothed with Christ's blessing. No more dirty work in the world for this crowd—they don't need to worry about their laundry any more. They can wear these white robes forever. It's the perfect uniform for heavenly life, spent praising God.

But their passage to this place was not easy. It was full of suffering and pain, tribulation and hardship. The road to hell may be paved with good intentions, but the road to heaven is full of sharp rocks and potholes, wrong turns and dangerous beasts. (Lions and tigers and bears, oh my!) The book of Revelation calls this struggle the "great ordeal," or the "tribulation," and for most of Christian history, most Christians have understood this to coincide with the mission of the church. The entry of the Kingdom of God into the world which began with Jesus created a conflict that is still going on, a conflict between the Kingdom of God and the kingdoms of this world. And in that conflict, people get beat up, bruised and battered. So that even the best of us might give up, or compromise to make life easier. But knowing what lies on the other side can keep us motivated to follow Christ's difficult and dangerous way. So the Bible gives us these visions of heaven. To show us that at the end of the road, on the far side of death, there is a life that we won't want to miss. This is what it looks like, this is what it sounds like, this is what it feels like to dwell with God eternally.

This is a vision of victory, not in the world's terms, but in God's terms. Dana Ferguson wrote, "Dying and rising in Christ is how we become victors. We are conquerors not because we escape persecution—Christ did not escape it—but because like him we are God's children." (p. 440)

So the vision shows us that the saints gather around the throne and before the Lamb to give him praise, and in so doing they recognize that the slaughtered Lamb is also the good Shepherd who brought them to the heavenly throne room, the one who promises to lead them to springs of living water and wipe away every tear from our eyes.

There is a difference between trusting in our Lord's eternal promises and expecting God to keep us from all harm. While we are alive in this world we are free to make our own choices, and the world is a dangerous place. But the world is also a beautiful place, and that's because it is a place where God's light shines through sorrow. And when we follow the path of Christ, even in the darkest valley, we can see where we are going, our destination. By faith, we can know that goodness is stronger than evil, love is stronger than hate, light is stronger than darkness, and life is stronger than death. Oh yes, victory is ours through him who loved us.

This is the most tender and comforting vision in all the Revelation, a vision of life in the shelter of the Lord. It echoes Psalm 23: You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. It affirms the words of Jesus, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be satisfied" when it promises we will hunger and thirst no more. And these words, too: "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted." It gives hope to those who suffer, and courage to those who face hardship. For to comfort is to fortify, to give strength for courageous action. To en-courage.

The whole of Revelation was written to en-courage, to give courage to those who were dis-couraged. So that they might live their Easter faith in a harsh and hostile world, filled with hope and joy. So that WE might live our Easter faith in a world that wants us to be fearful and sad. So that we might practice resurrection living.

May God give us the courage, and the faith, to let bursts of giggles and clapping and laughter erupt from our comforted souls as we praise Jesus Christ, now and forever.

For Christ is risen! He is risen indeed.