

Sunday, November 2, 2014: All Saints (Revelation 7:9-17)

## **Not all endings are bad.**

by [Dennis Sanders](#) in the [October 29, 2014](#) issue

I have a love-hate relationship with the book of Revelation. Actually, it's more like a love-fear relationship. With a whole lot of fear.

My phobia concerning the last book of the Bible can be traced to my coming of age in the late 1970s and early '80s. When I was about nine, I went to a youth event at my church, where we saw *A Thief in the Night*, the 1972 Russell Doughten film that depicts the Rapture and the Great Tribulation. The film and its sequels—*A Distant Thunder* (1978), *Image of the Beast* (1981), and *The Prodigal Planet* (1983)—would give *Friday the 13th*, *Carrie*, and the rest of those '70s horror films a run for their money.

Needless to say, I came away from the movie a bit unnerved. Did I really believe in Jesus? Would I be left behind?

*A Thief in the Night*—along with the end times novel *666*, by Salem Kirban—made for a number of sleepless nights in my youth. And it made me afraid of the book of Revelation.

So when I first looked at the lectionary texts for this Sunday, I didn't really want to write about the one from the book that scared me as a child. Besides, what in the world does this passage have to do with All Saints Day?

Then I read the passage.

Now, Revelation is filled with some fantastical and scary stuff. But this passage isn't scary. In fact, reading it brought me a bit of joy.

A great, multicultural multitude stands before God's throne and the Lamb of God, waving palm branches and giving praise to God. These people from every nation and language have been through a great ordeal. But now, as the old hymn says, the strife is over. Hunger and thirst are no more. As I used to hear growing up, there will

be no more cryin' and no more dyin'.

This passage is about the end times, but it is about a future hope, not a future calamity. It reminds us that not all endings are bad, and that hope is always present—now and in the not yet.

I remember when I faced an end time. It was 2007, and I had been leading a new church start in Minneapolis. After declining attendance and sheer exhaustion, I decided, with a core group of others, to close the church. It didn't feel good. I had hoped this would be a long-lasting ministry. The world that I had known for three years was ending, and it was painful.

But in the midst of that pain, I started to hear about how Community of Grace made a difference in people's lives. I heard from a dear friend who had felt estranged from church for years because he is gay. He was able to learn that yes, he does belong at Christ's table.

It was then that I had a small foretaste of that great celebration described in Revelation 7. The closing of a new church start was a hard ending, but it was also a good ending. It was a sneak peek at the big party God will be throwing in the future.

This doesn't mean we won't face trials, even great ordeals like the multitude in the passage has been through. What it does mean is that those end times that come up in our lives—the pink slip, the scary diagnosis, the sick family member—don't have the final word. As followers of Jesus Christ, we believe that we are never alone. Christ is with us in the present and will welcome us to a glorious party in the future.

*A Thief in the Night* did get one thing right. Those of us who are Christ followers will face trials, long before anything like a rapture happens. The great multitude has been to hell and back, but they remain faithful.

This passage is perfect for All Saints, because it gets us beyond the usual commemoration of this day. Yes, it is important to remember those who have died in the last year, but this is so much more than that. We remember the saints who are no longer with us, and we look forward to the day when we and all those dead saints stand together praising God.

A few years ago, I traveled to Florida to attend my uncle's funeral. He was only 60 when he died, but diabetes had taken a massive toll on his body. The funeral took

place in July in a small Apostolic church near Sanford. African-American funerals tend to be part memorial and part Sunday evening revival. Uncle David's funeral was no different.

As I sat there with my parents, my partner, and other relatives, the sanctuary came alive with music and the pastor's stirring words. That service reminded me—reminded all of us—that even in the midst of our pain and mourning, we know that death doesn't have the final word. There was hope—hope in the coming resurrection, hope in the day when all creation will be healed.

There's a song we sang in the Baptist church I grew up in:

By and by, when the morning comes,  
When all the saints of God are finally home,  
We will tell the story of how we overcome,  
And we'll understand it better, by and by.

The gathering depicted in Revelation is the time we tell how we have overcome. We will gather and understand all that has been cloudy. We will understand it better, by and by.

Maybe Revelation isn't so scary after all.