
Where Did *They* Come From?

Revelation 7:9-17

A Sermon preached in Page Auditorium on April 17, 2016 by the Rev. Dr. Luke A. Powery

Each week we pray, “on earth as it is in heaven” because our present doesn’t yet match God’s promise so we keep striving, praying, moving, pressing, working, going to church, attending bible studies, singing hymns, giving alms, serving in the community, and taking communion. These are some signs that we desire “on earth as it is in heaven.” We want God’s future now, God’s future present. So many have yearned and dreamed for this moment that there are all kinds of end of the world predictions throughout history.

Well before the end time imaginary predictions of the Left Behind book series, or the visions of Harold Camping (may he rest in peace), there was the year 1806. In that year, a domesticated hen in Leeds, England, appeared to lay eggs inscribed with the message “Christ is coming.” Great numbers of people reportedly went to see this hen and began to despair of the coming Judgment Day. It was soon discovered, however, that the eggs were not in fact prophetic messages of the future but the work of their owner, who had been writing on the eggs in ink and reinserting them into the poor hen’s body. If it was the end of anything, it was the end of that poor hen! But well before hens or Harolds, well before any of these, there is the revelation of John, literally the ‘apocalypse’ of John. Don’t get nervous, I’m not making any predictions today. And John’s vision anyway is much more hopeful and joyful than the usual doomsday predictions we hear. It’s much more expansive than the way we usually live or how we think.

“On earth as it is in heaven” but our present doesn’t seem to match God’s promise in this vision. “There was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands.” The palms are signs of joy and triumph. But even in what is considered to be utopia, the perfect world, God’s world, God’s eternal home, there’s a question that arises, from this encounter with diversity—every nation, all tribes, peoples, and languages. And the question is, “Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?” Where did they come from? Here’s someone who already knew the answer to his question. Sometimes we ask questions for which we already know the answer. Do I have to do my homework? Do I really need to make up my bed every morning? Do I need to practice piano? Should I vote in the presidential election? Do you love me? Where did they come from? The elder who asked knew that “These are they one who have come out of the great ordeal.” He’s referring to the persecution of Christians in Asia Minor. A time of brutality under Roman imperialism which is why Revelation is known as crisis literature. Christian martyrs, those who suffered and died for the faith all across the world.

Where did they come from? It’s almost as if he’s surprised. Like ants or spiders sneaking their way into our homes, we wonder where they came from. You know how we like to say ‘they’ or ‘them’ which is a way of saying ‘not us.’ Not our church, not in our house, not in our social clubs and networks. Not in our graduating class at Duke. Not at our workplace or in our neighborhood. They. Moving into our neighborhoods so we quickly put up a ‘for sale’ sign to take flight. They. Speaking a language that is not English and taking employment opportunities ‘away’ from others. They. The way they dress. The way they practice their religion. They. Where did they come from? We (not they) may be in for the surprise of our lives when we see who is in that multitude no one can count—from every nation, tribes, peoples, and languages. They may not be in our circles but they have always been a

part of the circle of God—they came from God, born of God, breathed into this world by God’s love. God is not the problem. Look at this vision of John. No, we are the problem.

French philosopher Jacques Derrida and others are on to something when they attempt to deconstruct our binary oppositions. We love binaries. We adore either/or. White or black. Male or female. Rich or poor. Republican or Democrat. Faith or science. Them or us. Duke blue or... The binary pits one thing against another with one being greater or better or more powerful. We function with an either/or mentality many times even when it comes to the kingdom of God. Evangelical or mainline. But it’s God’s kingdom, not ours. Where did they come from? They aren’t supposed to be here. They don’t have the right ID. I never met them. God never asked me for a reference letter on their behalf. Where did they come from? When our operative theological modality is ‘they’ we can quickly other someone and stick them in the object camp of non-human entity in order to control them. We adore the ‘or’ but God is an ‘and’ God with a wide tent, the great multitude that no one could count. Not you or you, but you and you. Our disjunctive or disjointed vision is why sometimes people don’t know if we believe in justice or ‘just us.’ But just as suffering is non-discriminatory for this great number from every nation, all tribes, peoples, and languages, so is God’s love, which will wipe every tear from every eye.

We may be an ‘or’ people but God is a conjunctive God with a conjunctive imagination. “From every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages.” With all the talk about building walls and the treatment of immigrants and refugees (‘they’) and taking America back from ‘them,’ it’s so critical to remember God so loved the world, not just the United States of America, because God has a conjunctive imagination. Every nation and all tribes and peoples and languages. And. This is not a vision of singularity but one of plurality. Not a ‘me’ perspective but a ‘we’ approach.

In 2014, the Duke alumni magazine did a special cover story on “The Changing Face of Duke.” It focused on the growing and largest minority group on Duke’s campus—the Asian and Asian-American student population with all of their various ethnic identities. Some from families who lived in the U.S. for years; others who are international students. As the article says, this blooming presence on campus is creating a “ripple effect of institutional change along social, cultural, and academic lines.’ But what is telling were some of the alumni responses to this cover story through such statements like ‘Duke’s not for me anymore.’ Me or We?

When Jesus enters the temple in the Gospel of Mark, he reclaims that space as a house of prayer for all nations (Mark 11:17). The day of Pentecost in Acts is a vision of many languages and cultures and ethnicities (Acts 2). It is a surplus of God. Even God, in God’s own being, is conjunctive—Father and Son and Holy Spirit, three persons in one. Our future as the people of God is to see the promise to Abraham fulfilled that by his offspring “all the nations of the earth [will] gain blessing for themselves” (Gen 22:17-18). It may take a while for God’s promises to be fulfilled but they will be fulfilled. The ‘and’ will come to pass. Both/and, not either/or. Every nation and all tribes and peoples and languages.

He’s got the whole world in His hands
He’s got the whole world in His hands
He’s got the whole world in His hands
He’s got the whole world in His hands

He’s got you and me sister in His hands
He’s got you and me sister in His hands

*He's got you and me sister in His hands
He's got the whole world in his hands*

You and me. Conjunctive. God makes room for every nation, all tribes and peoples and languages. There's always room for more in God's economy.

*Get on board, little children
Get on board, little children
Get on board, little children
There's room for many-a-more.*

*The fare is cheap
And all can go.
The rich and poor are there
No second class upon this train
No difference in the fare.*

There's room for many-a-more. There's room for the conjunctive 'and.' Rich and poor.

A choir is not a soloist though some diva sopranos may think they are the choir but for a choir to be a choir we need 'and.' Sopranos and altos and tenors and basses. And what we've seen on campus recently with various protests and sit-ins, it's important to affirm both students and administration, if we are to live into the future vision of God. Not just students or administration in bipolar opposition; heck, I'm an administrator as well and it's dangerous and lethal to move into 'they' the students or 'they' the administration whoever that may mean. Where did they come from? When we do that, even as Christians, we can write people out of the book of humanity, living our disjointed vision rather than the conjunctive hope of God.

A conjunctive imagination recognizes that there is a number in the throne room of God, which no one can number. To function with a conjunction theology is to openly embrace the other; it is anti-closure and anti-dominance. It is the embrace of the wide community of God and the "one great fellowship of love throughout the whole wide earth." We get into trouble when we want to close people out, box them in, shut them down because they don't look like us, act like us, think like us. Just because they are not like us, we think they are not God's. But John's revelation of God's future pushes us forward to remember that there's a great multitude that no one could count. From east and west, north and south, meeting for fellowship in Christ.

We may prefer a monochrome past or present, but we have a polychromatic future—ready or not. Will we make room in our hearts and lives for God's 'and'—every nation, all tribes and peoples and languages? This is not about the collapse of the world but the collapse of myopic stereotypical thinking about others and the kingdom of God while building up a deeper Christian understanding of life in the conjunctive Jesus Christ who is both divine and human.

It's always been about conjunctions for God from the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth. There was an evening and there was a morning. Waters and sky. Plants and trees. Birds and sea creatures. Male and female. Always conjunction—winter and spring and summer and fall. Jews and Gentiles. There are no built walls in the kingdom of God because those walls are torn down in Christ (Ephesians 2). Immigrants and refugees and orphans and widows, all citizens in God's city.

*In Christ now meet both east and west;
in him meet south and north.
All Christly souls are one in him
throughout the whole wide earth.*

We may want to build walls but God will eventually just tear them down and finally we will get it. We will see the consummation of the holy conjunction when we gather with the angels and elders and the four living creatures and the mosaic multitude from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, crying out to the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb with a conjunctive celebration of never ending praise, "Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever!" On earth as it is in heaven. Let it be so. Amen.