



Sermon by: Rev. Dr. Randy Bush
Text: Revelation 7:1-4, 9-12

May 11, 2025

Revelation Visions: Jesus and the Multitude

Let's begin with a brief mental exercise. I want you to call to mind an image of Jesus including the background behind him. You can close your eyes if you want; any image and setting will do. Now, maybe you pictured Jesus riding on a donkey, or Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus on the cross, or Jesus talking with Mary Magdalene on Easter Sunday. My assumption is that when most of us picture Jesus, we picture him alone – kneeling in prayer or standing at the door knocking. At most we picture Jesus with one or two disciples or at table with his followers. What we don't usually imagine is Jesus in a crowd, which is interesting given how often scripture describes Jesus being surrounded by lots and lots of people. There's Jesus feeding the crowd of 5000, or Jesus preaching in a house so crowded that they had to lower a paralyzed man down from a hole in the roof. We are drawn to a personal, private Jesus; but the bible most often shows a public Jesus out in the world, surrounded by mobs and crowds. This is a distinction worth exploring.

There is nothing wrong with preferring images of Jesus in one-to-one conversation over that of Jesus giving his sermon on the mount to a crowd seated on a hillside (said the man who is addressing a crowd of 200 listeners right now). There is nothing wrong with picturing Jesus as right beside you as you unburden yourself or share the prayers on your heart. But we can't forget that this same Jesus is called the "light of the world", the Savior of the nations. We profess our belief in one Lord, one faith, one baptism while being part of a church universal containing millions of believers from all over the world.

I recently returned from a Presbyterian conference for mid-to-late career pastors. There were about 30 of us present from lots of different settings: big and small churches, urban and rural congregations. There was a woman pastor from San Juan, Puerto Rico; a Guatemalan pastor serving a congregation of farm workers in southern Florida; four Korean pastors serving churches on the eastern seaboard; a quirky pastor from Long Island, a woman from California whose wife is showing signs of dementia, a few other interim pastors like myself, and a bunch more. We studied, ate, and worshiped together. We acknowledged Jesus as the Lord and Savior who knows the different settings of our churches, our various callings, our particular needs, and yet the same Christ who knows just as much about thousands and thousands of other pastors, other congregations, people of faith and people of no faith the world over.

It reminded me of a story I heard about an early space shuttle flight. Back in 1985, the first Saudi astronaut flew on a space shuttle mission. He described his experience orbiting the

earth in this way: *On the first day or so, we all pointed to our countries. The third or fourth day we were pointing to our continents. By the fifth day we were aware of only one earth.*¹

Revelation chapter 7 opens with a vision of four angels standing at the metaphorical four corners of the earth. They are over and above all the nations, all the land, sea, and people of earth. Out of the multitude of humanity, the angels then called forth a group of 144,000. This is a symbolic number, not a literal one. The Hebrew faith places great value in the symbolism of numbers. The number 12 is a symbol of both completeness and orderly perfection. That is why there were 12 tribes of Israel and 12 disciples of Jesus. So if you wanted a really large yet perfect number, you'd take 12,000 times 12 and end up with a huge multitude of 144,000 people.

But then a shift happens in verse 9. The 144,000 weren't nearly enough. It says there was a great multitude now visible that no one could count – people from every nation, all tribes and languages standing before the throne of heaven. Suddenly it's like seeing our planet from orbit in space; we're no longer interested in pointing out our individual nations or continents, but we see it as one earth, home to us all. It was this vast multitude who both worshiped God and were known and loved by God. So how do we balance out our individual experience of Jesus the Christ with this larger vision of him as the Lord of all creation who holds the whole world in his hands?

This brings me back to the piano piece I played earlier. As you recall, the opening of Rachmaninoff's Third Piano Concerto starts out quite simply – a melody of eighth notes played in unison with two hands. After two pages, the piano part becomes an accompaniment to the orchestra, now playing faster sixteenth notes. The pianist goes from playing eight notes per measure to 17 notes, then 28 notes every measure. By the time the first two minutes of the piece are done, the pianist has played over 1500 notes. But this devilish concerto is 45 minutes long. There are thunderous chords and demonically complicated runs, amounting to close to 35,000 individual notes. Who could possibly memorize and perform them all in the right order? As statistically impossible as it seems, concert pianists do it all the time.

Here's the secret to playing the Rachmaninoff concerto no. 3. You first learn all the notes and then you forget them. You memorize the chords and runs and melodies, but the piece is too complicated for you to direct your fingers how to hit each and every individual note. So at some point, you stop thinking about the notes. You trust your hands to play what they've already learned and you simply bring forth the music that is now in your head. You let go of the individual details and you become part of the global picture of that piece.

That is the main reason Christ did not come to earth as a guru sitting alone on a mountaintop whom we approach individually to learn his wisdom. Christ lived and walked and taught from the midst of all of us, with crowds pressing on him from all

sides, even as a woman with a flow of blood touched the hem of his robe and got his individual attention. He taught scores of people at once, yet also invited the children to come near to him for individual blessings, for of such is the kingdom of God. He is heralded as the Lamb of God by people from every land and nation in the book of Revelation, yet he is also the one who comforted Mary Magdalene one-on-one in the gospel of John. How do we make sense of this faith perspective that literally involves each of us as well as billions of people, spanning centuries of time and millions of miles? We don't. We aren't asked to understand the details. We are invited to let go – to trust the big picture – to let the music of faith become embedded in us so it can be shared with the world through us.

Laura Delano was a studious young woman who, in her youth, began struggling with mental health issues including bipolar disorder. She was given prescriptions for pills and sent off to college. She went to classes and graduated; she also cut herself, binge-drunk, and felt her life was hollow. She was institutionalized and prescribed Depakote, Prozac, Ambien, Klonopin, Lithium, and other drugs. Her new memoir is called Unshrunk and it talks about her struggle to get off meds and reclaim her life. A big part of her journey involved finding her place in the world again. And to us, whether we're struggling with mental illness or just daily life, she said these wise words: "We're built for tribes and villages and neighbor-hoods and potluck dinners. We're meant to feel it all and bear it all, together."²

On this Creation Sunday, we are mindful of the rich diversity of life that exists on our planet. We combine the joy of planting seedlings in pots around our church with our deep concern for the well-being of all life as safe drinking water, clean air, and fertile soil are increasingly in short supply. I am back home now in Milwaukee after my church conference time away, yet I carry with me the stories I heard from other pastors – in particular how the Guatemalan and Korean pastors feel compelled to carry electronic versions of their citizenship papers on their phones and how several of them had cancelled recent trips out of the country for fear that current American policies will prevent them from returning to the churches they serve. Also this week I was struck by the naming of an American pope, Pope Leo XIV – a Chicago boy, hopefully not a Cubs fan – a church leader who spoke from the heart about his connection to both Americas, North and South; someone with an American home and an adopted home in Peru; who chose as his first words the same words spoken by the risen Christ to the crowd of disciples in the upper room long ago: *La pace sia con tutti voi* – (Look, Jesus didn't speak English either.) Peace be with you all.

That's why the Revelation image of Christ is so powerful and so healing today. He stands with arms outstretched as people of all ages, races, and nations gather before him. We are invited to join that crowd. We are the individual notes that fill up the music score, the ones whose words and deeds make up the melody of faith that all the world sings. We're designed for crowds and villages and neighborhoods and potluck

dinners. God sees us as both individuals and as the multitude. And we are meant to be together. It's not bad being part of the multitude, if that multitude is around Christ, right?

¹ Larry Rasmussen, Earth Community, Earth Ethics, 1998, p. 98.

² Quoted by Casey Schwartz, *New York Times Book Review*, April 13, 2025, p. 9.