**Sermon Revelation 7:9-17**

INTRODUCTION

There’s a contemporary Irish poet I learned about in secondary school who describes the Irish landscape as ‘encroaching.’ By which I think he means two things: the first is that, often when you’re walking or driving in Ireland, you can find yourself in a little hollow or in between the trees, or along twists in the road where you can’t see where you’re going, or your field of vision is obscured. This makes the brave souls who rent vehicles on their vacations to the Emerald Isle very nervous. They’ll encounter oncoming traffic hurtling towards them at 60mph and it’ll lot like they came out of nowhere. But this encroaching landscape is also felt on hikes as the mist rolls in off the Atlantic and shrouds everything, reducing visibility down to a few feet.

OPENING STORY

I remember hiking up Croagh Patrick, a magnificent mountain and site of pilgrimage on the wild west coast and finding myself, and my friend Simon from college, surrounded by a thick mist, blurring the surroundings, and leaving us totally guessing at what lies beyond. We would take a few steps, and every now and then, the fog lifts for just a moment and we would catch a glimpse of the summit, teasing you with its beauty. But just as quickly as the mist clears, it rolls back in, obscuring your vision once again. It’s frustrating, no doubt about it. But there’s also a weird a sense of peace and wonder, silence, and anticipation. As we made our way higher it was easy to forget that we weren’t the only ones making the ascent, other climbers, pilgrims would appear like shadows in the mist, and we’d laugh together about how ridiculous we all were, sometimes they’d pull out a flask of hot tea and some barmbrack, reminders that we’re all venturing through the fog toward something greater. And finally, when you reach a rocky ledge, the mist lifted again, and the stunning sight of Clew Bay is laid out in front of you. There’s a little white stone chapel on the summit, and legend has it that St Patrick threw the snakes of Ireland of the summit into the ocean. It’s a moment of awe and gratitude, a reminder of the magnificence that lies in the unseen and the unexpected. I imagine that you’ve been on hikes or drives like that. But the fog is sneaky. It can wrap itself around the mountain in a split second again on the descent, veiling the view. Some fellow pilgrims told us that the mist on Croagh Patrick serves as a gentle nudge, reminding you that the real value lies in the climb itself, not just in reaching the top. There’s something profound in the dance between the summit and the fog, between clarity and mystery.

There is a second meaning of the phrase ‘encroaching landscape’ too (poets are often great at layering meaning on single words), and it’s that –it is easy to develop a kind of ‘short-sightedness’ in the social, historical and political landscape of Ireland. Heaney is one of our poets who so skillfully weaves the tensions of past (both ancient and more recent) and present together in his poetry. He brings the realities and legacies of violence in conversation with the peace-making efforts to the forefront. But he has a great knack for drawing your attention to the ‘encroaching’ impact of history on individuals and communities. Saying that the turbulence of the past and the fear and bitterness the still lurks, can and does obscure our vision of the future.

LINK

I imagine that when John of Patmos saw this vision of heaven, in Revelation chapter 7, of God’s Kingdom coming into fullness, the Kin-dom of all humanity (all creation) in harmony with its Creator…he felt something like turning a corner and having a grand vista opening in front of him. Of having the mist clear after trudging through challenging landscape and catching a glimpse of the summit that he’d been stiving for.

CONTEXT OF THE TEXT

John would have been writing this during the reign of the Roman Emperor Domitian. This emperor emphasized law and order, enforcing strict moral and religious standards. He was known for his autocratic rule and willingness to persecute those who opposed him or challenged his authority. He believed in a conspiracy against his rule and carried out severe purges. He proclaimed himself a god, demanded to be called “Lord and God,” and required that his subjects worship him. Domitian vigorously persecuted Christians and Jews, considering them as threats to the Roman religion and state.

LINK TO TEXT

This passage is like that breathtaking viewpoint along the road –yes, it’s perplexing and complex, but for John– it was a place where you can pause, take in the awe-inspiring scenery. The kind where photos don’t do the vibrancy of colors any justice or truly capture the depth and breadth of the view adequately.

TEXT

So, what did John see as he stood at this spiritual viewpoint? In verse 9 and 10, we are told he saw a multitude, like a vast tapestry, stretching across the horizon. Their white robes symbolizing purity, and the palm branches they hold represented victory and celebration. But what’s most captivating about this vision, is the diversity this multitude embodies. They come from every nation, tribe, people, and language. They are like vibrant threads intricately woven together. They are not threats to power, they are not disruptive to unity or peace, they are integral to it.

This viewpoint served for John, as it does for us, as a reminder of the wondrous diverse beauty of God’s Kingdom—a kin-dom, a beloved community that doesn’t discriminate or exclude but embraces every unique expression of humanity. Of people singing with the heavenly host, in worship to God who is present among them.

This viewpoint, this vision, just like the twists and turns of a scenic drive, acknowledges that the journey towards God’s inclusive hope will have its challenges. After all the writer of Revelation stresses in verse 14 that this multitude, standing before God’s throne, emerges from “great hardship and persecution.” It acknowledges that struggles and sorrows are part of our human experience, that in the climb the mist can roll in and reduce our vision and limited our capacity to see the summit, to see what we are trying to move towards. But even amidst the hardship, the summit is still there, the goal is still the same, the redemption and transformative power of God’s extravagant love and all-inclusive justice are still present and available to all.

LINK TO APPLICATION

I invite you to see this passage as a call to pause in wonder and celebration. Just as a scenic drive offers moments of reflection and awe. I invite you to wonder what it might look like to imagine a world that embraces all, no matter their race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, or economic status. I invite you to imagine a world where there is no hunger nor thirst anymore, no pain or suffering. That all humanity’s needs could be met at the “spring of the waters of life” if greed, fear, and power were no longer obscuring our vision of what could be. Imagine that the never-ending stream of living water would challenge us to reject stagnant notions of hierarchy or exclusion and drive us to embrace a more expansive and inclusive view, where all are welcome, valued, and celebrated.

APPLICATION

So, what might *you* envision, what might this community of faith of St Andrew envision… Might you see the great diversity that exists within Louisville. Different cultures, languages, and backgrounds woven together. And rather than being fearful of it or seeing as a point of division, or a hurdle to overcome, we could nurture a deep sense of belonging and unity, where every individual is valued and celebrated for the unique gifts they bring to the wider community. You might envision a Louisville where race, religion, gender, and sexual orientation are no longer barriers, but rather points of celebration and understanding. You might envision a city where economic inequalities would be addressed, and poverty eliminated so that no matter which zip code you live in or salary you have, everyone would have equal access to opportunities and resources, enabling them to flourish and thrive in the pursuit of their dreams, their fullness, truest selves. All this might seem far-fetched, but could it be because the mist has rolled in and had an encroaching effect on our vision of what is possible, and what God desires.

Because this inclusive vision does not need to remain confined to theoretical ideals—it can be actively realized in our daily life. You can engage in conversations and collaborations that connect diverse communities, fostering a spirit of unity and understanding. You can participate in efforts that advocate for the rights and dignity of all individuals. Whether it is to access reproductive healthcare or mental health services. You can make sure that everyone’s voice is heard by safeguarding voting rights. You can begin to meet the needs of the most vulnerable and historically marginalized by telling history from their point of view and reading books and accounts that are accounts of slavery, Jim Crow and mass incarceration– and when you do, that is when this panoramic vision of the beloved community can break through…and it is truly a heavenly vision. One where acts of kindness, compassion, and empathy, contribute to the well-being and flourishing of your neighbors. Where all can find never-ending, life-giving sustenance at the “springs of the waters of life.” Now that’s an otherworldly, a heavenly vision.

Which is, of course, the very essence of what John is seeing in our passage today.

CONCLUSION

So often the landscape of our lives can be described as ‘encroaching.’ Beautiful in its own way, with the joys and concerns of family, friends and self fully occupying our attentions, our visions. The worries of work, the nervous excitement of life’s transitions and various milestones, the pride of achieving long-held ambitions, the sorrow of loss along the way…these are the scenes, the landscape of our lives and they are precious and beautiful...and also they can impact our vision, our sense of the bigger picture, narrowing our focus…through which this vision in Revelation can truly become an unveiling, a revealing, a moment where the mist clears.

So, dear friends, as you continue on your spiritual journey, I invite you to keep this panoramic viewpoint close to your heart. Embrace the diversity, unity, and inclusive love it portrays. Let it guide your journey, inspiring you to build a world where every person, each thread in this majestic tapestry, can thrive, belong, and find their place in God’s Kingdom on earth.

TRANSITION TO RITUAL ACT

And today, as we move towards our final ritual with water. This morning our water comes from our own river, the Ohio. This water is holy, because all water is holy. So, as you come forward allow God to clear your vision for what is possible in our own city, and for how our community here can participate in bring such a vision into bring. Come and receive the living water!