

Analogies, metaphors, comparisons -means by which we teach, explain things. There are too many about the Church to quote –the Church is a gas station where the empty are filled-up to head back out on life’s highway or the Church is a hospital where the wounded receive God’s care or the Church a lighthouse shining forth the beacon of hope or the Church is a training center, the church is a battery recharger, the church is an oasis, a retreat center, the church is... I could go on. There’s a bit of truth in all of them but they all fall short in describing what the Church is, what happens here on Sunday morning.

Honestly, the Church is a disappointment to most. People come with great expectations; instead they find the font with water, the Gospel proclaimed in words, on the altar bread and wine, and God is on a cross. Hymns that teach the faith, from mostly dead people, even from Germans; rather than pop songs or sentimental ballads. It doesn’t help when the people start off by confessing they’re poor, miserable sinners, deserving only punishment; they’re not strong, there is no potential or spark or power from within to tap into, no strength from you; no motivational talks but pointing to the crucified one, people told not to follow their heart, they do not chart their own destiny or discover their purpose.

The liturgy is repeated and repeated, words of God? Why do we follow the various orders week after week the same old things God’s people have been doing for 1000s of years? Why are the lessons ordered on God’s time rather than flowing from man’s heart? Some put in entertainment to make the gospel ‘work’. Here the music is old. It’s all so routine; it can feel so ineffective, so ordinary, so boring. I’ve had children ask me, “pastor, does church need to be boring?” I’ll bend down, tell them “Yes.” It seems so out of touch with the world, so weak. Or... is it?

We aren’t here for something new but to find refreshment, rest in the promises given in Christ. We aren’t here to get the right strategies to stop sinning or a new life skill to make all your problems go away, but to come together in the communion of saints, to receive what we desperately need from our Lord to give -forgiveness, life in His Word, His Sacraments -for life -to contend with life –to get through life -to find joy in life ...every day until our last breath. We’re here for the Author and Perfector of our faith to feed us faith for today and forever. And forever is why we do what we do here today.

What does forever look like? John tells us. **A great multitude of the heavenly host -uncountable number -sits before the throne and the Lamb. Clothed in white with palm branches, they cry out: Salvation belongs to our God and to the Lamb!** Voices in heaven and on earth sing the unending hymn: **Blessing and honor and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and power and might be to our God forever and ever.** That is the future of the church. That is even the present church, happening right now.

Look around you. Is that what you see? If it isn’t, you need to understand with the eyes of faith. Because that is what is here. John was overcome with awe at that moment. He could not even speak. Where is your awe? That a sinner like you

is received by God in this place. Where is your realization of the holy ground of God's presence on which we stand? Where is your awe before the God to save you at the cost of His death? Where is your awe before the means of grace that deliver to you not only the promises of God but God Himself?

John questioned. **Who are they, where did they come from?** Ah you know. **They are the ones who've come through the great tribulation; clothed in the white robes of the Lamb's righteousness; washed in the blood of the Lamb. Because salvation belongs to God,** belongs to God, He has given it -to you, to the sinner in need of forgiveness, to the unclean who needs washed, to the unworthy who must be redeemed, to the lost who must be found, to the dead who must be raised, to...you.

You, God's people complain, He answers you. You rebel, He goes after you. You hurt, you suffer, He heals. You fail miserably in temptation, He restores. Blessed are you. Those beatitudes you heard in the Gospel, are not 'if-then' conditional statements, not Law-what you must do to be blessed, not a moral checklist in order to be blessed, but a description of who you are, how you live in the works of Christ. It's all gospel, all Jesus, all gift to you. It's how, why, you are holy, a saint right now.

There's a reason a cross stands front and center, a crucifix showing God being God for you; a spring of life from a font, a pulpit to raise up the Word, that you hear Him, an altar where we feast, a foretaste of the feast to come. Here in the heavenly liturgy, joining the feast now in progress; here we recall the saints, our fathers and mother who have gone before us -*because* they live; and you shall soon put your arms around them again, hear their voice you remember. Even, embrace grandchildren you will not get to meet here.

Here you shed your tears for those who cry no more but not as people without promise of joining them. Here we join our voices with angels, archangels, all the company of heaven, bridging time and eternity to sing with them: **Holy, Holy, Holy, blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord.**

You know what the Church is? It is where the dead live. We don't come here to regroup to fight on our own but to be swept up in Christ's eternal victory. We don't come here to give something from God but to receive what we need most in this life, to be joined to Christ as He is, where He is, in where He says, He comes to you, the Church where properly, His Word proclaimed and preached, in His Sacraments, the fullness of His saving glory. Here, heaven and earth come together as in no other place on earth. We don't come here to reminisce our fading memories of those who've died, we come to join with them in the same feast, same songs, same Christ, we are surrounded by the great cloud of witnesses, in the unending communion of the saints in heaven. This is the feast. Our loved ones are there. I long to see them again. So do you. We will. You are His blessed. **Salvation belongs to our God who sits upon the throne and to the Lamb forever.** The dead in Christ live and you live with them, for now in Christ here, and for eternity there.