

#782 Seeing the face of God

This week we bring you a sermon on Revelation 22-23 delivered by fellow editorial-team member Steve Albertin to his congregation in Zionsville, Indiana, last month. In this sermon, he meditates on the notion of seeing the face of God—not just on the last day, but in the here and now.

Peace and Joy,
Carol Braun, for the editorial team

“SEEING THE FACE OF GOD”

Revelation 21:10, 22-22:5

Easter 6 C

May 5, 2013

Christ Church

The Lutheran Church of Zionsville

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The recent search for the terrorists who exploded the bombs at the Boston Marathon was stuck and going nowhere until the authorities decided to release to the public pictures of the suspects. They hoped that someone would recognize their faces and tip off the FBI. It worked and within hours both of the suspects were off the streets.

Each person's face is unique. Our face helps to reveal who we are. We try put on a good face when we want to impress someone. Nothing reveals our broken hearts like a sad face. If you have ever seen a list of the FBI's Ten Most Wanted Criminals, you see pictures of their faces and not their feet. Even the most revolutionary social networking tool of our times is called *FACE...book*. Nothing grabs the attention of a crowd like a

pretty face. A disapproving glance can make us shrivel in shame. A gracious smile can make us glow with confidence.

It is especially important to be able to see the faces of our loved ones when we are in danger, alone or afraid. When our world is falling apart, when we are lost in a strange city, when we have lost a big game, been rejected by someone we thought we could trust or suddenly received the diagnosis we feared, we long to see the faces of the ones we love. The face of our parent, our friend, our spouse, brings the comfort we so desperately need.

It is to that kind of situation that today's Second Reading speaks. Written in secret code language to comfort suffering and persecuted Christians at the end of the first century, Revelation assures its readers that even though their end is near, even though they feel frightened and alone, their future is in God's hands. Even though they feel unclean and excluded from Jerusalem, even though they feel locked out and unable to scale the high walls designed to keep out the unworthy and unwanted, they can look forward to that day when the gates will be opened, the walls will be breached and they at last will be welcomed into the heavenly Jerusalem.

All will be well.

It will be as if they have returned to the perfection of the Garden of Eden. Water will flow in "the river of life. They will eat of "tree of life" from which humanity had been forbidden to eat ever since God banished Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden.

Most of all, on that coming day God's people will at last get to see "the face of God." No longer will this world hide and obscure the presence of God. No longer will we have to live by faith and not by sight. No longer will the suffering and death

that so riddle our lives make us doubt that God is on our side.

With a message like this, it should not be surprising that we read passages like today's Second Reading beside the deathbed, in the hospital, on the battlefield, and at the cemetery—when the circumstances of life most contradict the loving promises of God. The promises of the Book of Revelation assure us that finally in the sweet by-and-by we will get to see God face-to-face. When we do, it will be the best face on which we will have ever laid our eyes.

Promises like this can reinforce the assumption that Christian faith is all about dying and going to heaven. Christian faith is certainly about the promise of eternity, but the Christian faith also promises to give us a glimpse of the heavenly Jerusalem already here and now. Already now, we have a foretaste of the feast to come. Already now, we get to see God face-to-face.

This is a true story. This actually happened a month ago. The heavenly Jerusalem appeared in the midst of darkness and death. The Lamb who was slain has begun his reign. The River of Life flowed. The Tree of Life healed the sick and broken. I saw the face of God.

Her name is Susan Clark. She lives in Fort Wayne. She is my wife's best friend. She is dying of cancer.

A month ago she returned from the hospital where she had received the results from what had seemed to be an endless number of dehumanizing medical tests. The results were not good. She and her husband had every reason to be discouraged. When she walked into her home, she realized that she had a message on her phone. She listened. It was a voice that brought back memories from a far different time in her life.

For years she had worked together with my wife in a special pre-

school for at-risk children called Hand-In-Hand. Many of the children came from homes where they were neglected and abused. Few had fathers. Many were being raised by their grandparents. All were deprived. Everyone wanted to be loved.

It was the voice of Billy. Billy was the mother of one of Sue's former students, Essie. For much of the time while Essie was in Hand-In-Hand, Billy was in and out of jail. Billy had several children all from different men. Grandma mostly raised Essie. Through the years Billy would occasionally call Sue sharing her woes and updating her on Essie. But they had not talked for some time. Now she had called again. Billy's voice announced, "Miz Clark, mah Essie's in the hospital."

Sue was worried. Essie was only 14 years old. What had happened? The next day Sue and her husband (who also drove the van that picked up the students for Hand-In-Hand and knew Essie) went to the hospital to visit Essie not knowing what to expect. Walking to her room, they realized that she was in the maternity ward. When they got to the room, there she was lying in her bed alone, without a newborn baby at her side, grief on her face and darkness in her soul. Between them and the bed was her mother, Billy, who abruptly quipped with disgust, "Miz Clark, Essie done got herself in trouble." She then reported that Essie had gotten pregnant. Upon delivery the baby had died from so many birth defects. Essie laid there listening to her mother report her sins, crying and grief stricken. It was as if her world had come to an end.

But that is not what Sue saw. All she saw was the little Essie she had in school, now older but still just a fourteen-year-old little girl who looked as if the world has just chewed her up and spit her out. As Sue later told her family, "I did not know what else to do, but I wanted her to remember that Mrs. Clark told her that Jesus loves her."

Then, with tenderness and compassion, her own body ravaged and weakened by disease and failed chemotherapy, she crawled into the hospital bed with the grieving Essie, held her tightly in her arms and sang, "Jesus loves me this I know."

When Sue told Ann and me this story, I knew that I had heard and seen something special. Sue would have downplayed what she had done. She was just doing what she had always done. Why would she should not do that now? Her cancer did not mean that she had to stop sharing the hope and the love that Jesus had put in her heart. Jesus had not stopped loving the world dying on his cross, why should she on hers?

That day in the hospital room, the vision so vividly portrayed in today's Second Reading, was fulfilled. The heavenly Jerusalem descended. The River of Life flowed. The Tree of Life bore fruit. In the midst of this sin-scarred world, Essie and Billy walked in the Garden of Eden. They had seen God face-to-face.

I do not know if Essie and Billy realized it, but they certainly had been blessed. They had seen not just Susan Clark, but Jesus—revealed in Sue's love for someone who surely did not deserve to be welcomed into the heavenly Jerusalem. As Bessie lay in her bed, she must have felt unclean, unwanted, and undeserving. She must have felt that she had been locked out of the heavenly city. The walls must have seemed a hundred feet high. She must have felt like Adam and Eve forever prevented from ever eating from the Tree of Life.

But that day in a hospital room in Fort Wayne, just as it happens all over this world when the love of Jesus graces and soothes the bodies and souls of this sin-sick world, when water is poured and the cross of Jesus is marked on the foreheads of sinners, when the grieving and discouraged hear that "This is the body of Christ given for you ... This is the blood of Christ

shed for you," when we are assured through a song, a conversation, a warm, tight hug, "Jesus loves me this I know," we have seen God...face-to-face.