

“Long Before and Long After”  
Delivered Sunday, November 6, 2011 – All Saints, Stewardship Dedication  
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Revelation 21:1-7

George Lindbeck had long and distinguished career as a theologian and leader of ecumenical movements which sought to claim the common faith of all Christians across denominational lines. The son of Lutheran missionaries, he grew up in China and Korea. He was appointed to the faculty of Yale Divinity School where he served on the faculty for over 40 years. At his retirement party, he was asked to say a few words. How does one sum up in a few words a lifetime of living the Christian faith – from the mission fields of China to being a world-renown scholar and ecumenical leader?

That evening George Lindbeck simply told a story. He said that – the week before he had been home because he wasn’t feeling well, and he turned on the radio to pass the time. To his delight he found the annual Christmas concert by the Saint Olaf College Choir. During intermission the announcer asked one of the students what she appreciated about being a member of the choir. She said, “When I perform with the choir I realize that I am joining in music that began long before I got here, and that will continue long after I have gone.” Lindbeck said: “That is what it has meant for me to do Christian theology. I became part of a music that was sung long before I got here and will continue long after I am gone.” (1)

Today, through our praise to God for the Saints, and the dedication of our pledges, we commit ourselves to the Christian faith – long before we got here and long after we are gone. At the Communion Table, we recall the names of the members of this congregation who have died in the last year, celebrating the witness of their faith and their impact on our lives, and the life of this congregation. When we dedicate our pledges, we contribute to the ministry of the church as heirs of those who have gone before us, and as people who entrust our gifts to the future. Sure, our gifts go to pay current staff and to keep the lights on and to support local mission today. But we are actually committing to something so much bigger than our own experiences of this church. Our pledges proclaim our trust in God to be at work in through this church and in the world long after we have gone.

That is the hope of the Christian faith. We are part of a human journey with God that stretches back in time to the earliest nomadic people of Mesopotamia when God called them to be a covenant people; and when in the fullness of time Jesus came to reveal God to the human family in person. Through him we believe in a future that will one day gather us all into the close company of God among the saints in never ending praise.

Our scripture reading from the Book of Revelation draws upon imagery that was important to the people of God long before John had this revelation on the Island of Patmos. He writes during a season of severe persecution for the church: *Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth* – that is the hope long ago proclaimed by the prophet Isaiah that God was about to create a new thing. *And the sea was no more* – is an image that goes all the way back to the opening verses of Genesis, where the sea is described as a turbulent place of chaos which is tamed by the life-giving word of God. John’s vision of the *new Jerusalem* recalls the city long ago sanctified for worship which now lies in ruins. A *new Jerusalem* will be restored, gathering the faithful across time and place into the peaceful dwelling of God.

This is the clearest picture the bible gives about what heaven might look like. Old songs of faith, sung in the present tense, with the assurance that – come what may – the children of God will some day in the future assemble before the throne of God in ceaseless praise. Death will be no more. Pain will be no more. Mourning and crying will be no more. For the former things will have passed away, and the promises of resurrection and eternal life will be fulfilled.

We live in this in-between time. Between those promises made long ago, and through our worship and our gifts we commit ourselves to their future fulfillment.

Educator Jonathan Kozol tells the story of young Anthony who grew up in the rough neighborhood of the Bronx. Raised by a single mother, shortly before Kozol met him, he had suffered the death of a young uncle to gang violence. However, against all odds, Anthony became resilient and determined not to be swept up in the violence all around him. He loved the poetry of Edgar Allan Poe, and his favorite poem was “The Raven,” with its famous repetition of the word, “nevermore.” Jonathan Kozol’s curiosity about Anthony and his resilience amid so much suffering and loss, led him to ask Anthony to describe what he imagined the Kingdom of God to look like. Anthony wrote out by hand on college ruled paper: “No violence will there be in heaven, no guns or drugs or the IRS. If you still feel lonely in your heart, or bitterness, you’ll know that you are not yet there. As for television, forget it! No one will look at you from the outside. People will see you from the inside. All the people from the street will be there. You’ll recognize all the children who have died when they were little. God will be there. He’ll be happy that we have arrived.”

On the top of the sheet of paper Anthony had scrawled “Check out the back!” When Kozol turned the page over, he saw a drawing of a raven with the word emerging from its mouth, “Nevermore.” It turns out that at the funeral for his young uncle, Anthony had been asked to read our text from Revelation 21. “And on that day there will be a new haven and a new earth. Nevermore will there be any suffering. Nevermore will there be any pain. Nevermore will there be any tears. But God will wipe away what tears are left from their eyes.” (2)

That is the promise of All Saints Sunday. By the power of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, those who have gone before us live in the close company of God, a place of “nevermore.” That is the faith that emboldens our stewardship. We give to the church – committing ourselves to the fulfillment of God’s promises – because our lives are shaped by the music of faith that began long before we got here and will be sung long after we are gone.

AMEN.

## NOTES

1) David Bartlett, “Together with One Voice,” preached at Columbia Theological Seminary at President Steve Hayner’s inauguration as president, *Vantage*, Summer, 2010.

2) Lisa Nichols Hickman, *The Worshipping Life*, p. 54-55.