

I know some people -- maybe you do, too -- whose first priority in life should be to re-arrange their bedroom furniture. What other answer could possibly explain the fact that they permanently seem to have gotten up on the wrong side of the bed each and every morning? It seems as if they misread the installation instructions on their beds and assembled them the wrong-side out.

Anybody here know people who are like this? They go through each day cranky and irritable, purveyors of doom and gloom. These are the folks that always know what new natural disaster has just struck, what local businesses are about to go bankrupt, whose marriages are on the rocks. How could we survive life without these wrong-side-of-the-bedders? How could we get around without the black clouds and gloomy forecasts? Without wrong-side-of-the-bedders, we would never fully appreciate how miserable life really is.

The book of Revelation is often perceived as sharing that same sort of bleak perspective -- a wrong-side-of-the-bed vision foretelling pestilence, punishment, famine, death, destruction. But the Revelation of Jesus to John is not a narrowed down version of despair, nor is it a nerve-racking vision of wrath. In today's first lesson we are given celestial glimpses of glory, which may cause us to wonder, "what might it be like to enlist in God's reign and exist in God's peace?"

One thing is certain, the divisiveness of nationality, the different prejudices we might have, the diverse opinions we possess, will most likely be forgotten as all people come together to praise God. The Apostle John is given a unique vision of one congregation, one church, and it joins all its separate voices together in a resounding harmony of glorifying God. John saw this as the church of the future. John also saw this as our template for bringing the church to life in our own time.

Instead of being just another organization lobbying for what it deems important, the church is challenged by this vision in Revelation to itself become an "foretaste" of paradise. Now there's a word for you: "foretaste." It's not a word used

much outside the church these days, although it is a familiar one in Scripture. But it may be a word that the church needs to proclaim. For our text calls the church to be what in biblical language is a foretaste of the feast to come, otherwise known as the end times.

In Hebrew the concept is conveyed by the word *Shamayim*, which literally means a foretaste of heaven. If you have ever had an encounter with the Spirit, if you are alive and aglow with life, you know the meaning of *Shamayim*, or "earnest." In Greek the word for earnest is *arrabon*, a legal term denoting a deposit made that renders the contract binding. An earnest is a promise, a pledge, a foretaste, an embodied symbol of something which is to come in its fullness later.

When a young couple plants a spindly little oak sapling smack in the middle of their new backyard, it is an earnest of the future they envision in that space. Someday the tree will grow to shade their yard with an enormous umbrella of green. Its sturdy branches will hold the tire swings and treehouse platforms of their children yet to be born. It will carpet the ground with its brilliant fall foliage, and feed a legion of squirrels with its annual crop of acorns. It might not look like much when planted, but the few spindly limbs of that sapling oak bear the weight of a tremendous earnest.

Although the ultimate "earnest" or "foretaste" is the Holy Spirit, as Spirit-empowered people we are each called to act as "earnests," as a foretaste of the ultimate triumph that Christ's salvation has in store for all creation. On the day of salvation, the book of Revelation proclaims, all believers will loudly praise God's "blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might."

Which begs the question, are you an earnest, a leaven, a foretaste of heaven? Does your life attest to the presence of God's divine gifts to the world? When others listen to you speak, watch you work, see your home, do they experience that

encounter as an earnest of Christ's victory, of God's redeeming love for the world. We are all "earnests," we who are part of the body of Christ, are to be a foretaste of what is to come. And as you think about that for a moment, let me ask you to consider if our church is an earnest of the future – if the friends and members who come here are conduits of the Lord's divine light offering others little glimpses of the brilliance, the glory, that awaits redeemed creation? Is our role in this community a leaven of heaven?

Missionary, physician, and historical theologian Dr. Albert Schweitzer gave his life to serve the needs of those who lived in the African jungle. He was to the first half of the 20th century what Mother Teresa was to the second half. He gave one of the best definitions of "ethics", and lived what he defined: "Let me give you a definition of ethics: It is good to maintain life and further life; it is bad to damage and destroy life ... Ethics is the maintaining of life at the highest point of development -- my own life and other life -- by devoting myself to it in help and love, and both these things are connected."

Schweitzer allegedly hung a lamp in front of his hospital that shone brilliantly throughout the jungle darkness for a wide area. The light became a beacon of hope and healing for the area's sick and dying. He is said to have hung under the lamp a sign that read: "At whatever hour you come, you will find light, and hope and human kindness." Both the sign and the lamp were "earnests" of Schweitzer's ministry. Perhaps, similarly, our congregation should seek to be a lamp that says to the world, "Come by Here. For Here is a Foretaste, a Sample, a leaven of Heaven!"

Schweitzer practiced his "earnestness" with full knowledge of the world's cruel ways, and a clear vision of human frailty and sin. Nonetheless, Schweitzer maintained his focus on eternity, and leavened heaven with every fiber of his being. His remarkable life, and witness, touched countless people who themselves

became an "earnest" a "foretaste" to the people that they inspired. Schweitzer was able to offer a leaven of heaven in each of the three types of basic human needs often experienced in our frail and mortal present.

The first Need is the Physical – John's vision from Revelation reveals sights and sounds that promise a new heaven and a new earth. It also demonstrates the understanding that God will finally be present with us, that he will make His home with us, and the Lord will provide for needs. In fact toward the beginning of Revelation the Apostle declares that all believers who gather around God's throne will "hunger no more, and thirst no more." In other words, we will be delivered from our physical needs.

Similarly, each of us is capable of providing some measure of sheer physical comfort to those whose physical needs are consuming all their energy and hope. In fact, as you probably already know, soon our social ministry team will be collecting food donations to provide for those hungering in our community. It's hard to work on an empty stomach; it's hard to learn when you're cold and tired; it's hard to play when you're weak and malnourished.

The Second need focuses on the Spiritual -- Jesus' vision to John revealed that divine deliverance involves more than just filling up stomachs and banishing body aches. There are other aches that have no neurological cause. There are pains suffered by a parched soul. Earlier in Revelation the enthroned Lamb offers believers "springs of the water of life" as . . . sustenance for our eternal souls. Earnest upwellings of this same spring are already available from our own faith community, as we are washed in the waters of baptism and spiritually fed with the body and blood of Christ.

Finally, the third need is one that evolves Emotion-- As frail and failing human beings, however, we find our emotional needs are perhaps the most difficult to satisfy, and are even more demanding when denied. Without emotional strength

and flexibility, even the strongest body will fail, even the surest spirit will falter. When our body labors, it needs a quiet center, a sense of emotional ease, in order to bear the physical hardship. Our spirit can soar only if it knows there is a safe and secure emotional scaffolding resting under its flight path.

In today's Revelation text God meets our emotional needs in two ways. The text promises God will "wipe away every tear" -- suggesting that the emotionally honest and cleansing tears we possess will first be allowed to flow, but that these tears will then be dried by God's own tender hand. And if we desire to become an earnest or a foretaste of this quality of emotional care, we, too, must not be afraid to show the same depth of feeling and to let others do the same. In response to a genuine outpouring of emotion, an earnest of the coming age does not judge, but offers what is needed -- to dry a cheek, to hold a hand, to show empathy.

In a creative writing class, a young teenage girl wrote this short poem: Don't criticize. Don't analyze. Don't even try to sympathize. Don't say you understand because you don't. Just hold me in your arms for once. And love me as I am. Like my mommy used to do before the world grew up on me.

Will those of you who call this church your home hold the world in its arms and love it, as an earnest, as a foretaste, of God holding the whole world in his Almighty, merciful, and loving arms? Will you be a leaven of heaven in your family, a beacon of light for your community, your world? Will you, with the help of the Holy Spirit, seek to be a Saint, like the Saints we are honoring today? Like those individuals who have shined the light of Christ so brightly that we can't help but be inspired by their faith? If so, my only response to you is Thanks be to God for that. Amen.