

Streetsville United Church
Sunday, April 25, 2010
Rev. John Tapscott

"HE WIPES AWAY OUR TEARS"

Revelation 7:17

In Revelation 7, verses 16 and 17 we read these comforting words, "They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat, for the Lamb in the midst of their throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes." Isn't that a wonderful promise, "God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

Now the book of Revelation which records the visions God gave to John while he was in exile on the isle of Patmos. Revelation is full of visions of tribulations and bloodshed and plagues and the final battle between God and evil, all of which, as Jesus said, are unlike anything that has come upon the earth. But every so often God gave John a vision of heaven, which is a welcome relief to the graphic imagery. Now there is a past, present and future dimension to these visions. These visions will give hope and encouragement and comfort to Christians as they go through the last times. They also gave hope and comfort and strength to the early Christians who experienced persecution and imprisonment and even execution under the Roman empire. Indeed, they are helpful to us now as we go through trials and tribulation in this world. These visions assure us of God's final victory. They assure us that God's promises will be fulfilled and that our faith is not in vain. These visions encourage us to stand fast and to hold firm in our faith. "God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

First, let's say that there is much that brings tears to our eyes.

You know, it seems that public displays of emotion are much more common than they used to be. We don't have the stiff upper lip that many of our forebears had. I have been reading a book by Stephen Brunt called Gretzky's Tears, the story of Wayne's Gretzky's career with the Edmonton Oilers and his trade to the Los Angeles Kings. The title comes from the press conference at which Gretzky thanked and said good-bye to the Oilers fans. Or at least he tried to. The press conference ended abruptly and awkwardly when Gretzky began to weep. I can understand. There are times as a minister when the emotion of the moment catches up with me and I feel tears welling up. It might be at a wedding or at a funeral or at a moving worship service, such as when we stand in the shadow of

the Cross on Good Friday. In fact, I have a small package of Kleenex up here under the pulpit in case I need it. Sometimes it's hard to hold back the tears. And I don't think it's necessarily a bad thing. Weeping can be a healthy release of emotion. And I think that only those who weep tears of sadness will be able to weep tears of joy.

A woman named Clara Null wrote this in Christian reader magazine, "It was one of the worst days of my life. The washing machine broke down, the phone kept ringing, my head ached, and the mail carrier brought a bill I had no money to pay. Almost to the breaking point, I lifted my one year old into his high chair, leaned my head against the tray, and began to cry. Without a word, my one year old took his pacifier out of his mouth...and put it in mine."

Well, there are many things that bring tears to our eyes, maybe not to the point of literally crying, but to the point of feeling deep sorrow. For example, there are the tragedies and the sufferings of the world. Who among us didn't feel for the Polish people as they mourned the loss of their President and his wife and many other high Polish officials. And the fact that they died en route to a memorial service at the place where thousands of Poles had been killed in World War 2 made the sadness even deeper. So too, did the sight of the Polish President's daughter, an only child, standing alone as she mourned the loss of her parents. We identify with the sorrow because most of us know the grief that comes from losing a loved one.

And of course, we feel sorrow over the suffering which people endure through earthquakes and floods and other natural disasters. Then there is the sin and brokenness of the world - hunger, war, homelessness, poverty, illness, terrorism, death and all the rest. All this makes us sad. Then too, we feel sorrow over our own sins and past wrong decisions and choices. We have a sadness over what might have been and should have been, but never came to pass in our own lives or in the lives of those whom we love. There is a sadness that things meant for good never quite fulfill their promise. One thing that causes me deep sorrow is the spiritual blindness among so many good people who do not believe in Jesus Christ. They don't know the good shepherd or the salvation he offers. They won't let him guide them to springs of living water. It saddens me because these people face an eternity without God. And it often seems so hard to get them to see their need and cross the line of faith. Yes, unbelief causes me sorrow. But if we have sensitive souls at all, there is much that brings tears to our eyes, or at least sorrow to our souls. But says John, "God will wipe away every tear from their eyes..."

Secondly, let's understand that God himself weeps with us.

Do you remember the song Eric Clapton wrote after the death of his little son. "Tears in Heaven." Well, there are. The things that cause us to feel sorrowful cause God deep sorrow, as well.

Skeptics often throw out the charge against God that He is distant, uncaring, allowing people to suffer on this earth while he does nothing. But the truth is deeper and different. Yes, there is a great mystery to suffering, but God is not distant from it. God is somehow with us in it, weeping with us, suffering with us.

How do we know that God suffers with us and for us? How do we know that God by His Spirit is present in every place of suffering and with every suffering person? It's because of what we see in Jesus. "Whoever has seen me," said Jesus, "has seen the Father." Jesus is the visual expression of God's character in human flesh. What we see Jesus doing is what the Father in heaven does.

As Jesus rode a donkey towards Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, he wept over the city, and predicted its destruction, because the people had not recognized the time of God's visitation. And you recall how Jesus came to Bethany when he heard of Lazarus' death. John tells us, "When Jesus saw Mary weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. "Where have you laid him?" he asked. "Come and see, Lord." they replied. Then follows the shortest verse in the Bible - John 11:35, simply, but profoundly and powerfully, "Jesus wept." Jesus wept over unbelief and over death, and those tears are also on the face of our Heavenly Father. "The Father and I are one," says Jesus. And without diving into deep theological waters, that simply means that the Son perfectly reveals the character of the Father. As the Son weeps on earth so does the Father in heaven. The troubled spirit of Jesus is the troubled spirit of God. And when Jesus suffered and died on the Cross, the Father in heaven suffered too. What parent wouldn't suffer as they saw their child suffering? In fact, they would do anything to rescue their child from it. But in an amazing act of love and grace and self-restraint, God allowed his beloved and sinless and obedient Son to die for us, in our place. That death paid our sin debt completely so that we who believe in the Son may enter into heaven. God weeps with us and for us. This we know because we see God in Jesus. And only the one who weeps with us can truly wipe away our tears. "God will wipe away every tear from their eyes..."

Here's the final thing I want to say. God not only will wipe away tears in heaven; he is also doing it here and now.

Revelation gives us a wonderful vision of that time when God has finally put away all that causes us to be sorrowful. All evil, sin, hunger, scorching heat,

homelessness, all gone in God's new heaven and new earth. Even, it seems, unbelief. For there is a great multitude in heaven from all nations and tongues gathered around the throne saying, "Salvation belongs to our God and to the Lamb!" Now that doesn't necessarily mean that all people will be saved, but it does mean that a great multitude will come to saving faith, including many who are not yet believers. And that gives us great confidence in the Gospel message and a great desire to keep proclaiming it and sharing it.

But there is a present dimension to God's work, as well. What God will do in heaven, he is doing now. Oh partially here and now, and completely then and there. But even now God is working here on earth among people. That's why we can say not only, "God will wipe away every tear from their eyes" but also "God *is* wiping away every tear from their eyes..." And that includes our eyes.

Yes, we weep, but God weeps with us and acts to wipe away our tears. God is with us now by the power of the Holy Spirit giving us comfort and hope through the truth of his word. Who, for example, can not read or hear the 23rd Psalm without being comforted and strengthened in Spirit? In fact, our church is a comforting community, in which we care for one another, strengthen one another, and act as channels for God's love. Paul writes, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who comforts us in all our afflictions so that we may be able to comfort one another with the comfort we have received from God..." Here in the community of Christ, we receive the joy of God's forgiveness, the guidance and wisdom of God's word, the hope of heaven, strength for our daily challenges, support and encouragement from one another. Here we have opportunities to relieve the suffering of others, to change peoples' tears into smiles of gratitude and relief.

A minister was called to the bedside of one of his members who was very ill. "Reverend," the man said, "I know I'm going to die, but I'm not afraid. As I pass through the valley of the shadow of death, the One who has led me all through life will still be with me; and I shall dwell with him forever." As he spoke, his emotions were stirred and he began to weep. The minister took a Kleenex and tenderly put it to the man's face. "Thank you, Reverend," he said. "The next time tears are wiped from my eyes, God himself will do it."

"God will wipe away every tear from their eyes." Yes, he will, and even now God is wiping away tears from peoples' eyes. He is doing it for us and he is doing it through us. God calls us and empowers us for this ministry. "Comfort, O comfort my people," says your God.