

A Long View

Revelation 7:9-17

Golan Trevize was a councilman of the mighty First Foundation, a government system set up centuries earlier by a mystical mathematician to guide the future of billions of planetary worlds after the collapse of the Galactic Empire. Unknown to members of the First Foundation, that mathematician had also set up a Second Foundation, a secret organization of mental giants to guide the future of the First Foundation. And now, some 20,000 years in our future, members of the First and Second Foundations are locked in an impossible stand-off brought about by Gaia, a global consciousness that desired a future of unity through a single galactic consciousness. Three futures, three options, stood before Councilman Golan Trevize, who had an uncanny knack for making the right decision based on insufficient information. Trevize would choose the future of the galaxy: government by military and technological might, government by mental manipulation, or government by a gaia galactic consciousness.

This is the scenario that concludes 20th-century science fiction writer Isaac Assimov's *Foundation* series. Without completely spoiling the ending for you, the final choice was made on the basis that the Galaxy might one day find itself confronted by another Galaxy of beings. The need for unity in the face of a potential enemy from without guided the fateful decision, a decision made as a result of taking the long view. What is the long view of being church, the long view of being acknowledged children of God, and the long view of being human? What does it mean to see life in a way that reaches all the way back and all the way forward? As we take stock of where we want to go, what do we need to consider?

Today is *All-Saints* Sunday, the first Sunday following *All Saints* Day, a festival set aside to remember those people of faith who have come before us. These are the ones on whose shoulders we stand today. They have built the foundation for us and challenge us to provide the same support for the next generation. This is a day for us to look all the way back and give thanks. It is also a day for us to look all the way forward and also give thanks.

We live in time – not always on time, but always in time. It is a curious thing to live in time. Our parents, grand parents, and ancestors lived before us. Our descendents live in and usually past our experience. At the same time, we are reminded that time is a creation. Our faith teaches that all of us, ancestors and descendents, live in God's present tense. So, the long view in life may well be as much deep and wide as backward and forward.

In times of crisis, it is important to take a long view. We need to look deep and we need to look wide as well as looking back and forward. Let's be thankful for those who have lived before us. They shaped the space in which you and I live. We have grown up in the relational systems they have given to us. We show our gratitude, not by mindlessly living within the parameters we received from them, but by internalizing the best of the values they gave us and creatively forging newer and healthier ways of living to offer our

children. We have to make the best choices we can make given the circumstances that challenge us. Those choices will change us and, inevitably, change our children.

In times of crisis, it is especially important to take a long view. We need to look down the road as far as we can – imagining the world we hope to see and our shaping it with creativity. Without hope, we will not survive. Without a vision, we will not thrive. Without direction, we'll be like friend who, when golfing, used to say, "Well, I may not hit the ball straight, but at least I don't hit it very long." Living that way, we spend all our energy moving from one urgent situation to another without knowing where we want to go and what we want to do. The long view includes looking forward.

When I was in seminary, we spent a lot of time deconstructive theology and the Bible. We studied scripture with an academic fervor and questioned everything! Our professors were so helpful. They reminded us of the importance of studying with a ruthless curiosity and, at the same time, to remember that such study is not the same thing as faith. When we approach the Bible and other aspects of our religious traditions from the perspective of faith, we need to take in the whole picture. The theology, the biblical study, and tradition all express the experience of faith which then touches our own experience.

That seminary experience reminds me that the long view is not always a matter of looking either back or forward. Sometimes, it is a matter of looking wide and deep – remembering that life is almost never just black and white. The same Bible that can be studied critically and questioned as to inconsistencies, contradictions, and outright errors, can also inspire and lead us to spiritual renewal and maturity. The same church that can endorse war, torture, and slavery, can challenge us to make peace and work for justice.

The vision offered by the book we call Revelation (7:9-17) is not so much a look ahead as it is a look around and within.

world situation

suffering persecution

ranks up there at least as frightening to those early Christians as Great Depression did to grandparents, the holocaust did to 20th century Jews, and the current economic crisis in conjunction with the global climate crisis does to us. Yes, they needed to look back and give thanks for the example and inspiration of those who came before. Yes, they needed to look forward and glimpse a vision of their direction, a reason to hope that the future will be better than the present. But the places we have to look in these times of crisis are wide, around us to see the world and its possibility more clearly, and deep, within life itself to affirm the reality of God's presence within us, around us, and saturating every particle and wave of the universe.

Let's look around. Look at that "great multitude that no one could count, from every nation ... standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands." Right now, in the midst of our crises, there are souls who have lived and, perhaps, who will lived this life of pain and struggle, gathered in the presence of God in celebration, joy, and worship. They are our cloud of witnesses – our strength

and inspiration who cheer for us now. They are in God's very presence and, so, they are present to us. All we need to do is wake up to their presence and their strength. Right now, in the very air we breathe, the presence that we call God permeates us.

Difficult times challenge us to give in to our fears, to believe in to the destructive messages, and to trust in the mentality of scarcity – that there is just not enough to go around, just not enough of what we need. This *All Saints* Sunday reminds us that there is another way. Life lived the way Jesus taught us and showed does go through a narrow gate. It is a steep and winding road. Life is challenging. Sometimes crises come because we make bad choices. Losses come and bad things happen. Sometimes they are of our own making and often they just happen.

The journey of life is much wider and deeper than we can imagine. The world is much more than it seems to be. There is mystery and holy presence, and strength for the journey.

The journey of life is a personal one, but it is not taken in isolation. We do not travel alone, especially in challenging times. The presence of Christ still goes before us and follows after us. We are flanked by a community that loves us even more than we know. The communion of all saints stretches all the way back and all the way forward, and surrounds us now. We are together in God's presence and in God's present.

Their presence does not take away our challenges, but it strengthens us to meet them. Their support does not remove obstacles from us, but it inspires us to overcome obstacles. They do not help us avoid crises that come as much as they help us to find our own courage to face fear and not give in. We stand with them now and join their song: "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen." In sacred mystery, the meaning we seek in life is around us and within us. Look around you. Look within yourself. See the face of God.