

We Did Not Come Here Alone

November 5, 2023 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

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Texts: Revelation 7: 9-17

Please will you pray with me.

Spirit of the living God, spirit of the well ancestors of this people and this place, fall afresh on us this morning. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts together be acceptable to you, oh God, my rock and my redeemer. Amen.

Beloveds, I have to tell you, when I told people this week that I'm preaching from Revelation, usually the reaction has been something like this – "oh wow." And I get it! It's a challenging text, full of what a certain preaching professor of mine calls "stones in the road," stumbling blocks in a Scripture that don't make sense to our 2023 ears or don't seem to align with our values. The blood of the Lamb? Who is seated on a throne? Where is this throne anyway? And this wildly recounted story of apocalypse that is the book of Revelation – what relevance does it have to the current apocalypses that are unfolding around us?

On this All Saints Day, I'm going to ask us to open our hearts and minds to what Revelation might have to say to us about ancestors and ancestral support despite all the "stones in the road." Because I believe this passage from Revelation is a powerful vision of ancestral healing that matters, deeply, to our work for transforming our world – this present-day world and the one we will pass on to those to come.

I want to begin by acknowledging that we all have different relationships with our ancestors. Some of us come from immigrant families and histories where ancestors and their stories might dwell far away, and we have to work to keep them close. Some of us carry heavy burdens of guilt and shame about the systems of oppression our ancestors participated in creating. Some of us might feel disconnected from our ancestors because of the family severance that was a tool of chattel slavery. Some of us might have thriving relationships with our ancestors and ancestral traditions. Some of us might be sitting here with some skepticism – what kind of relationship is possible when someone crosses the veil of death, anyway? Probably most of us carry some kind of ambivalence about

our ancestors – they gave us our life and also, they passed on some gunk that is painful, or unfair, or a legacy that we struggle to transmute in this lifetime.

Welcome to each of these experiences, and to those that I haven't named or imagined. Welcome to all of it. It all makes sense. There are forces much larger and longer than our lives that have shaped our connection or disconnection with our ancestors.

So, wherever you might find yourself in relationship to your ancestors, take a moment now, you can close your eyes if you like, take a couple deep breaths, and really let yourself feel welcome here. All of yourself. Your particular history and identity, your particular ancestors, your particular journey or experience of relating to them. Take a moment to let the welcome come from inside of you. Welcome to all of it. We're here together.

I'd like to tell you a story.

Years ago, fresh from the passing of my beloved Grammy, a friend gave me a book called *The Smell of Rain on Dust*. It's written by a man named Martín Prechtel, who was the spiritual leader of a Tz'utujil Maya community on the shores of Lake Atitlán in Guatemala in the 1970s and 80s. This book and the Maya cultural wisdom that Prechtel shares became foundational for my process of grieving and honoring my grandmother, and every experience of grief I've had since.

The Tz'utujil people have a complex belief system about what happens when we die that is far more intricate and beautiful than this sermon could possibly do justice to. But there's a piece of it that feels vital for us on this All Saints Day, and for our reading of Revelation this morning.

As a lake-facing people, the Tz'utujil imagine a great lake that is the Sea of Time. On this shore, here we are – in our physical reality, with our human bodies, with our senses, with each other in these pews. On the other side of the Sea of Time are the beaches of the ancestral world, where well and benevolent ancestors wait to receive the dead and initiate them into healthy ancestorhood.

When someone dies, it takes a lot of time and a lot of energy for their spirit to cross the Sea of Time from this shore to the ancestral shore. They need a kind of spiritual canoe. For the Tz'utujil, it is the active grief, praise, love, memories, and offerings of food and song of the people on this shore that builds a canoe for the deceased and helps to propel it across the Sea of Time. Once they arrive there,

the well and benevolent ancestors greet them and help them to shed the baggage that weighed them down in their human form – so that they can become an ancestor who can return to bless and guide us.

When those well ancestors visit us, they don't often speak in language, but they make their presence known through nature and sensation. Those goosebumps that travel up your spine when you hear a particularly beautiful piece of music? The Tz'utujil teach us that that might be the presence of the ancestors. When a butterfly comes to hang around you for a moment where time stretches out, perhaps it's your grandmother come to remind you how beloved you are. That leaping fish that you see just after you ask your ancestors for support making a risky decision? (True story). They are listening.

In the Sea of Time, the trouble comes when there's not enough grief to push someone all the way across to the ancestral shore. Maybe when they were alive they were violent when their temper flared, or maybe they were caught in the grips of addiction in such a way that it ruptured some of their relationships. In any case, when there isn't a strong enough current of grief-love to help the deceased make it to the ancestral shore where their unhealed stuff could be transformed, they tend to get caught in the Sea of Time and come back to inhabit the **tenderest** member of the next generation. This is how the Tz'utujil conceive of generational patterns of addiction, abuse, or unhealthy dynamics that run-in families. It might even speak to some of the intractability of systems of white supremacy, patriarchy, and so on – the harmful generational patterns persist when we haven't managed to tend our ancestors and our grief robustly enough for them to make it to the other shore.

If we can remember them, thank them, sing our gratitude and our grief to them — even if it's grief for what we wish could have been possible with or for them and wasn't — and they *do* make it across the Sea of Time? It's been my experience that sometimes the ones who caused the most harm become the most available to support healing. I've seen this in my work organizing for reparations for slavery: once on the other side of the Sea of Time, some of my ancestors who built wealth through stolen indigenous land and enslavement of African people are the most spiritually eager to repair what they contributed to breaking. I've heard a friend whose mother struggled with addiction throughout her life say, in the wake of her passing, that their relationship felt healthier, fresher, more supportive than it was able to be in her lifetime. A different life and relationship become possible on the other side of the Sea of Time if we on this shore keep the connection strong.

And so, we return to Revelation, to our stony and wild passage about all these figures dressed in white, waving palm branches and singing praise. They are a “multitude that no one could count,” reads the Scripture, “from all tribes and people and languages.”


Imagine with me that this multitude are our benevolent and well ancestors who have made it across the Sea of Time. The Scripture says, these are the ones who have “come out of the great ordeal.” They have been met by a living God whose love reaches deeper than any shame they might carry, whose grace liberates them to participate in the work of repairing the world. They are healed and healing. They are ready and energized to bless our work for justice, wholeness, and wellbeing for all beings. For those who caused big harm in their lifetimes, they are longing for the belonging of accountability and repair and are ready to support us to heal the wounds that happened at their hands. For those who suffered deeply in their human form, there is rest and cleansing and belonging. They are here to help guide **us** to the springs of the water of life, as the Scripture says, just as God has done for them.

Let’s take a breath together and breathe in that image for a moment. It’s pretty sweet, amen? To feel how deep our bench of ancestral support is? And it’s not just ancestors of our particular family that we hear about in Revelation. Our ancestral bench is stacked with ancestors who were freedom fighters and organizers and dreamers who walked this road ahead of us, ancestors from other times and other places and other families who are still important guides and supports for us. They are truly a multitude from all nations that no one could count, and with their support, we don’t have to do anything on our own strength alone.

Here’s the rub, though. Like a plant that needs water and sunlight to thrive and grow stronger, our relationships with our ancestors need steady and regular nourishment. We nourish our ancestors through new or ancient ritual like the Communion we will share today. We nourish them with our songs and our praise. We nourish them by calling their names, as we’ll do together here in a bit. We nourish them by weaving tapestries, stitching love into the fabric. We nourish them by making giant papier mache puppets and parading them around! We nourish them by cooking recipes that they taught us, perhaps by setting aside a tiny plate for them while we eat it. We nourish them by working to repair that which their choices contributed to breaking. We nourish them through making and receiving reparations. We nourish them through our laughter, through our memories. And we nourish them by asking for their support. Our ancestors need

our nourishment throughout the year, but yearly practices like All Saints Day can help us remember and feast them with our love.

Finally, we nourish them through **gratitude** for all the choices, big and small, that they made that allowed us to be here on this planet in this body at this precise moment in time. The poet Ross Gay puts it best in his poem “Catalog of Unabashed Gratitude”:



thank you
the ancestor who loved you
before she knew you
by smuggling seeds into her braid for the long
journey, who loved you
before he knew you by putting
a walnut tree in the ground, who loved you
before she knew you by not slaughtering
the land; thank you
who did not bulldoze the ancient grove
of dates and olives,
who sailed his keys into the ocean
and walked softly home; who did not fire, who said *stop*,
don't do that; who lifted some broken
someone up; who volunteered
the way a plant birthed of the reseeding plant
is called a *volunteer*

Thank you, ancestors who loved us before you knew us. Thank you, ancestors who know us and long to support us now. Let us feed you and sing to you and remember you this week and in all weeks to come, that we might feel your presence with us as we continue to work to make God's kin-dom on Earth, as we continue to train to be good ancestors ourselves.

Amen.

