

In Harmony Divine

All Saints' Sunday

November 5, 2023

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Scripture

Revelation 7:9-12

After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice, saying,

“Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne and to the Lamb!”

And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, singing,

“Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom
and thanksgiving and honor
and power and might
be to our God forever and ever! Amen.”

Sermon

In March 1867, the Scottish-American naturalist John Muir (1838-1914)—author, environmental philosopher, an early advocate for wilderness preservation in the United States, and founder of the [Sierra Club](#)—was struck blind. He was 28. Muir grew up in a strict Presbyterian household. Well-versed in scripture, he could not contend with his father’s austere piety. Young John had to find his way. He left home but didn’t know what to do with his life. He studied botany and geology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He loved exploring woods and swamps, collecting plants, and was also good with machines. In 1867, after several years of wandering, he got a job at a wagon wheel factory in Indianapolis. Working in the factory late one night, trying to fix a new drive belt with a metal file, he had an accident. The file slipped and punctured his right eye, and soon after lost sight. He cried out, “My right eye is gone! Closed forever on God’s beauty.” [1] Sympathetic blindness set in, causing the left eye to go blind.

Muir was confused and adrift. He wrote, “The sunshine and the winds are working in all the gardens of God, but I—I am lost.” One of his close friends, Jeanne Carr, wife of a professor at the University of Wisconsin, wrote, “Dear John, I have often in my heart wondered what God was training you for. He gave you the eye within the eye, to see in all natural objects the realized ideas of [God’s] mind.” In about a month, Muir’s sight gradually returned in the right

eye and left. The recovery of sight, he said, was "like a resurrection." "Now I have risen from the grave, the cup is removed, and I am alive." Because of this experience, he felt called to use his "eye within the eye" to explore the world, travel, and become a botanist. Muir was keen to follow in the footsteps of Alexander von Humboldt (1769-1859), the naturalist and geographer, a rock star of the nineteenth century, who explored the Spanish colonies of South America. [2] So, Muir headed south. On September 2, 1867, he crossed the Ohio River into Louisville and then walked one thousand miles to Florida through a South ravaged by war, on his way to Cuba.

Muir made his way through the city of Savannah, and he arrived with only \$3 in his pocket and couldn't afford lodging. Waiting for money to come from family, Muir had no choice but to sleep in St. Bonaventure Cemetery, just south of town. He spent five nights camped out under live oak trees draped with moss beside the gravestones. He looked at everything around him, noticed every plant, and listened to every sound. He saw the way the vines and trees grew over the old headstones. Steeped in the New Testament, he turned to the language of new eyes and rebirth to describe the life-changing insight that came to him there, an experience that changed him and shaped the rest of his life. He looked out at the cemetery. "I gazed," he said, "in this peerless avenue of inverted forest awestruck as one newborn new arrived from another world without past or future, alive only to the presence of the most adorned and most loving of all the tree companies I have ever beheld." Then, he gradually came to the awareness that the graveyard was alive! With life! "This Bonaventure," Muir wrote, sounding like a Presbyterian, "This Bonaventure is one of the Lord's elect, [God's] most favored abodes of clearest light of life." "The whole place seems like a center of life."

Seeing that the gravestones were powerless against the forces of life, he realized that death should not be feared. Death is stingless indeed. Life is evident in the midst of death. "The grave has no victory for it never fights," he said, "all is in harmony divine."

That was a profound experience for Muir. Surrounded by death and decay, he encountered the greater power of life. Death is weak and stingless in the presence of life. It's powerless before the presence of resurrection, which is the power of God's life. Surrounded by death, he came to know the harmonizing power of life—or, better, *Life* (with a capital "L"). With new eyes, Muir wrote later in life, "One can only see by loving; love makes things visible and all labor light. Nobody can be ambitious to do anything wonderful, when God's wonders are in sight. Every day we should all pray, 'O Lord, open Thou mine eyes.'" With resurrected eyes, with the eyes of love, all is seen and known.

Long ago, John of Patmos had a similar revelation, not in a graveyard but in a cave. He was given a glimpse of God's future. He saw a procession of countless multitudes, from all tribes, peoples, and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, before Christ, robed in white. Angels and elders (the Greek reads *presbyteron*) and the company of heaven stood around the throne, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshipped God (Rev. 7:9-17). The choir of heaven sang, "Blessing, glory, wisdom, thanksgiving, honor, power, might

be to our God forever and ever!" The Lamb, the Risen Christ, was at the center, the bright Morning Star (Rev. 22:16) who shines forever, where night is no more. There, "they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, ..." (Rev. 22:5). The great communion of saints, this glad procession is drawn into doxology, into endless praise of Christ, the Light.

We find a similar vision at the end of Dante's (1265-1321) *The Divine Comedy* in the *Paradiso*. Dante's journey leads him to the fellowship of the saints in light, to the beatific vision. Dante says, "...for the divine light penetrates the universe according to the fitness of its parts so that nothing can hinder it." "This secure and joyful kingdom," he explains, "thronged with people of old times and new, had sight and love all on one mark." [3] Their focused attention was on Christ, the center. Dante says, "From that moment my vision was greater than our speech, which fails at such a sight, and memory fails at such excess." [4] In the end, the vision is love, and love allows him to see. Things, people, creation, and God only become visible through love. Love illumines. It's the love of Christ as light that allows us to see. It's this love, as Dante came to know, "that moves the sun and the other stars." [5]

On this All Saints' Sunday, we claim this truth and take great comfort in this: that life and death are held by Christ, who sits as "the center," the Alpha and Omega, our beginning and our end (Rev. 21:6). Because "In him all things hold together" (Col. 1:17), heaven and earth are reconciled; past, present, future are one and held together. Being in Christ means we always stand in some relation to those who've gone before us and now wait for us. We "share," right now, "in the inheritance of the saints in the light" (Col. 1:12). "We are surrounded," right now, "by so great a cloud of witnesses" (Hebrews 12:1). Can you see them? With your "eye within the eye," can you see them? Can you hear them singing? Heaven and earth, held together in Christ's love. We dwell in Christ's light. As Muir knew—as we know— "All is in harmony divine." And so we join our voices in that old hymn and sing:

*O blest communion, fellowship divine,
We feebly struggle, they in glory shine;
Yet, all are one in thee for all are thine. Alleluia. Alleluia.* [6]

Sources

- [1] Cited in James B. Hunt, *Restless Fires: Young John Muir's Thousand-Mile Walk to the Gulf in 1867-68* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2012), 49. The remaining quotations related to Muir may be found at 49-52, 105-109.
- [2] On the extraordinary life of Alexander von Humboldt, see Andrea Wulf's brilliant biography *Invention of Nature: Alexander von Humboldt's New World* (New York: Vintage, 2016). "On 14 September 1860, one hundred years after his birth, Alexander von Humboldt's centennial was celebrated across the world. ...The greatest commemorations were in the United States, where from San Francisco to Philadelphia, and from Chicago to Charleston, the nation saw street parades, sumptuous dinners and concerts.... In North America...four

counties, thirteen towns, mountains, bays, lakes and a river are name after him, as well as the Humboldt Redwoods State Park in California and Humboldt Parks in Chicago and Buffalo. The state of Nevada was almost called Humboldt when the Constitutional Convention debated its name in the 1860s. Almost 300 plants and more than 100 animals are named after him..." (6-7).

- [3] Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy: III. Paradiso*, trans. John D. Sinclair (New York: Oxford University Press, 1939), Canto XXXI, 447.
- [4] Dante, *Paradiso*, Canto XXXIII, 485.
- [5] Dante, *Paradiso*, Canto XXXIII, 485.
- [6] From the hymn "For All the Saints." Text written by William Walsham How (1823-1897). Tune, SINE NOMINE (Without Name), composed by Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958) for *The English Hymnal* (1906).



John Muir's self-portrait sleeping in St. Bonaventure Cemetery, Savannah