

Jessica Meier, who receives her first Communion today, pointed out in class that it is hard to believe in what you cannot see.

John of Patmos, who received the vision we now read as Revelation, would say that it is hard to believe in what you can see.

John is writing to believers who are going through one version or another of a *great ordeal*, which is to say life as a Christian in the Roman empire.

Some are threatened by legal action ranging from harassment to execution; others are more insidiously jeopardized by assimilation and capitulation to the culture, just going along pragmatically with the way things are.

Everyone knows who is in charge, the power that rules the economy and wields the sword, the authority portrayed as the beautiful and elegant goddess Roma, Rome.

John writes to those who live in the long shadows of her stately statues so they will not believe in what the empire has trained them to see.

He portrays Rome not as a regal, powerful woman on a charging steed but rather as a drunken prostitute riding a hideous beast that will ultimately turn on her and destroy her before its own inevitable demise.

This, John insists, is the truth, the reality all too invisible to the everyday eye.

Do not believe in what you think you see, he urges, for heaven views things very differently, and that's the vantage point which ultimately matters.

As New Testament professor Craig Koester points out, John uses a powerful literary device to re-train our eyes.

Heaven introduces something before John actually sees it; the author hears one thing and then sees something wildly different than what he was naturally expecting.

In chapter 5, Jesus is introduced off-stage to John as the Lion of Judah...and since this is a letter meant to be read aloud in Sunday worship in Smyrna, which biblical scholars believe did not have video screens, the reader pauses so that you in the pew cannot help but anticipate a picture of what Jesus the triumphant "Lion King" must look like.

*Then I saw ... a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered.*

All of heaven erupts in worship.

The Lion of Judah is a murdered Lamb, dead yet standing; the conquering king is a victim of the system, the emperor of heaven a meek and bloody mess to the imperial eye.

He conquered at the cross; he rules everything because he lost everything, won it all by losing it all, triumphed in battle by dying.

John does this again in today's reading from chapter 7.

Here he is introduced to the saints, the servants of God, a carefully counted regiment, 144,000 Israelites, 12,000 from each tribe, with a thorough roll call so that the ear in the pew cannot help but conger it up in the mind's eye.

*After this I looked ... and there was a great multitude that no one could count ... from every nation, from all tribes and peoples, standing before the throne and before the Lamb.*

They are the ones who have emerged from the *great ordeal*, which is to say, they are the fortunate who have died.

Their robes are white because they have been washed in the red blood of the Lamb, who is now their shepherd.

Their tears have given way to the springs of the water of life, blessing bubbling up for them to drink in rather than grief leaking out down their faces.

Everything is turned inside out as God makes *all things new*: losing is winning, getting slaughtered is conquering, the Lion is a Lamb, dying is the launch of real life, and the head count of salvation is an uncountable multitude.

This *great multitude* is the *great cloud of witnesses* we celebrate today.

These are the saints, the servants of God, the family of the One who was, and who is, and who is to come, as John writes it.

God's saints are also those who were, and who are, and who yet will be: they are our companions of the past, present and future all together at one table, one meal, *the feast of victory for our God, for the Lamb who was slain has begun his reign*.

The saints who celebrate in holy Communion with us give us examples from a heroic history; they also give us a glimpse and a hope of a joy that awaits us when we become powerless enough to conquer too, and they give us companionship, in and beyond the flesh, right now.

They are our friends in the *great ordeal*, which is John's telling phrase for life here.

The *great ordeal* is different for all of us, living in different times and places, under different regimes, with different challenges to faith and faithfulness, with different temptations soliciting us, different distractions filling up our unreliable everyday eyes.

The drunken prostitute staggers through every age, wreaking her unholy havoc of legal and economic injustice and perilous power-tripping across every bloody page of human history, including our own.

We need friends to make it through, and John says we have 144,000 of them, only there are really so many more than that.

And they are beautiful, though your worldly eyes drunk on the empire's draught of fancy lies might not tell you so.

They are blessed, but we need the Lamb to say so, because to us they appear to be anything but: the poor in spirit, the mournful and meek, the hungry and hopeless, the merciful and pure in heart we see as naive, the peacemaking and the persecuted whose lives appear to be such a waste, an undercompensated drain on the gross national product.

For the saints of God, life in the slick insanity of this world really is a *great ordeal*.

But there is a promise: we will all come out of it.

God comforts us with profoundly good news: we will all be given the gift of death.

Blessed are we, even though it doesn't feel like it, even though we resist it, even though our eyes and ears are not anywhere close to ready to see our deepest fears to be the gateways of our salvation and hope and joy.

So the promise and the testimony of the great cloud of witnesses insist and beckon us.

They are there to carry us through this *great ordeal*.

They are there to teach us to carry one another.

And through it all, every Sunday, every Eucharist, well before we can see God's dream come true, we celebrate.

We sing and carry on and party into forever because God has already finished what hasn't happened yet, and we can be absolutely certain about what our eyes absolutely cannot see.

*Rejoice and be glad*, says Jesus, when our eyes give us no sensible reason to do so, and the saints show up to show us how so that we can show the world, which desperately needs us to be

obvious about our invisible and invincible hope, because it is so hard to believe in what you cannot see.