

This sermon was preached on Saints Triumphant Sunday, November 7, 2010, at Amazing Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church, Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. Pastor Ben Zahn is Amazing Grace's sole pastor.

Text: Revelation 22:1-5

Every painter has a story that unfolds on the canvass resting on his easel. From a pallet of colors the painter picks. Masterfully, yet artistically, each brushstroke of paint is applied. Slowly the painting begins to tell a story. Each stroke adding to the canvass, making the picture more complete and the story more clear.

But what will it tell? Will the colors on the canvass communicate a political purpose? Will the brushstrokes make the face of someone famous as discreet details in the background are meant to dog him? Will this painting picture a memorable moment or elicit emotion on the part of the observer?

Every painter has a story that unfolds on the canvass resting on his easel. Michelangelo's tapestry on the Sistine Chapel's ceiling speaks. Leonardo da Vinci's depiction of the *Last Supper* describes. Rembrandt's *Three Crosses* reveals. Vincent Van Gogh's *Starry Night* shares. Stories are told. Emotions are expressed. Points are made. Pictures are painted. These famous pieces of artwork hang on the walls of museums around the world – each for art enthusiasts or the casual observer to enjoy. Each tells a story.

There is a picture, however, whose canvass is not colored with colors that communicate a political stance or that make the face of someone famous. No! This painting pictures Paradise. This painting's brushstrokes aren't from da Vinci or Michelangelo or Rembrandt or Van Gogh. No! This painting is by the Apostle John. In fact, this painting isn't for the art enthusiast or the casual observer, but for you the child of God. Here, in the last chapter of the last book of the Bible, **A Perfect Picture of Paradise is Painted for You!**

But why is the picture painted?

Every picture is painted for a reason. Originally, Michelangelo didn't want to paint the Sistine Chapel, but Pope Julius II commissioned him and so he obliged. Da Vinci depicts the *Last Supper* at the request of the Duke of Milan. Rembrandt painted the *Three Crosses* to show the crucifixion of Christ. Van Gogh painted his *Starry Night* to express his emotion when he was a patient in an asylum.

But the apostle John? Why is this picture of paradise painted? He's the furthest thing from paradise. After all, he's on an island called Patmos, exiled there for his faith. If that's not bad enough, there's an expanse of water separating him from the city of Ephesus and the Christians still clinging to Christ there.

But those Christians during the 1st Century didn't have it much better. They were picked on and persecuted like a student bullied in school. They were labeled losers. They were identified as ignorant and irrelevant. They were assaulted by the accusation that their God is dead and gone and cannot help. They were living in the midst of persecution with the curse of sin all around them and inside them.

After all, that perfect Paradise in Eden was lost. That dwelling where man walked and talked with God without fear or shame. That dwelling where the presence of God didn't produce panic. That dwelling where the Tree of Life promised physical life forever. That dwelling where healing wasn't needed and nothing was placed under the thumb of God, labeled for condemnation. But now creation and creature are subject to frustration and the curse of sin.

You know what that's like, don't you? Living in the midst of persecution with the curse of sin all around us, just like John and the Christians of his day? Your classmate avoids you because you're religious. Your coworker looks down on you because you ask off of work so you can attend church. Your friend ignores your repeated attempts to reach out to her with the loving concern of Jesus. You know what that's like you, don't you? Living in the midst of persecution with the curse of sin all around us? But it is also in you!

It's in your heart, your home, your relationships, and your memory. It's pain. The pain of guilt that recognizes your snippy response hurt your spouse. The pain of regret that wishes the words could be retracted. The pain of embarrassment that wishes the situation could be rewound and redone. The pain of a conscience that is plagued by yesterday's mistakes or dreading tomorrow's uncertainties. The pain of a body needing healing but instead is assaulted by arthritis or a knee needing replacement or an eye needing surgery or a finger needing stitches.

The curse of sin is all around us, even infecting us. But what's worse isn't that it is painted on the canvass of our lives for all to see. What's worse is the pain of life and the curse of sin reflect a ruined relationship with our Creator. The canvass of John's life and those 1st Century Christians...the canvass of your life and mine isn't a beautiful tapestry that tells a beautiful story but an ugly mess. As they needed, so you and I need healing from the curse of sin that's felt. We need sights and spirits raised. We need a mood changed from gloom and doom to hope and happiness.

Because the painting promises!

Comment [g1]: The chosen metaphor of a painting by a master artist fits well the genre of biblical literature as Pastor Zahn expounds on one of the visions painted by inspiration on the pages of Revelation.

In keeping with the emphasis of this second key issue (freshness and variety in law and gospel), the use of this metaphor enables the sermon to walk familiar law and gospel paths with fresh imagery.

Comment [g2]: Notice how Pastor Zahn stays consistent in his use of metaphor as he proclaims the law to our hearts. Perhaps the only improvement is that "ugly mess" could have been expressed in terms of a distorted or hideous piece of artwork.

How beautiful! How perfect the **Picture of Paradise Painted for You!** It surpasses the famous faces or breathtaking scenes artists have painted. It trumps the stories told through the colors and brushstrokes of those who applied them to the canvass. This picture of Paradise gives you a promise you possess at this very moment no matter how rough reality is or troubling your times are.

Listen to what the apostle John was privileged to see as he was given a glimpse of heaven: **“No longer will there be any curse. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads.”** (Revelation 22:3a, 4) Picture that for a moment! The laborious toil of work with its due dates and deadlines. The swollen hands from a long day’s work or blistered ones by the hard work. The pains of pregnancy or the frustrated feelings that overflow and overwhelm on a daily basis. Bodies bruised or broken, hearts heavy or hurting, minds made anxious or mortified. Eyes that cannot gaze upon the beauty of the Lord himself and live. The wage sins always pays to every person – death – all of it...every curse will be no more! Gone completely! Forgotten forever!

Why? Because Jesus, **“the Lamb who will be in the city”** (22:3b), hung not on a tree of life, but the cursed tree at Calvary. He was cursed by his Father so you are not cursed forever for your sin, but blessed by your Father. He was condemned as a criminal and bowed his head in death so you stand acquitted and are able to gaze upon your God unashamedly and unhindered. Jesus was crucified to the cursed tree that you might enjoy forever the tree of life and the healing from all the troubles and pain of this world caused by sin. For **“the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb”** flows to you. The salvation the Lamb secured flows to your stricken conscience. The forgiveness the Lamb won is yours because his name is on your forehead. Written there when the water was splashed at your baptism in our Triune God’s name. Inscribed there when the waters of life – the message of eternal life in Jesus – reached your ears and changed your heart. What a painting with brushstroke after brushstroke of promise! A colorful tapestry of promises for you!

Because...the painting portrays!

Sometimes painters will paint themselves into the painting. Rembrandt’s famous *Three Crosses* includes the painter himself hidden among the people at the foot of the cross at Calvary. It portrays that he too was there when the Savior died.

When your eyes look closely at this painting of heaven, they don’t just notice the crystal clear water of life flowing from the throne of God and the Lamb. They don’t just focus on the fruit the tree of life produces month after month. They don’t just see there aren’t any effects of sin to be seen. Your eyes are drawn to a phenomenal reality that the Apostle’s painting portrays: **“The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him.”** (22:3)

If you were to paint on a canvass the activities you are going to do for eternity, what would they be? When I attended Lutheran Elementary School and we practiced for the Children’s Christmas Eve Service, I can remember the director telling us that we were practicing this particular song again and again and that we better get use to singing because that’s what we were going to do in heaven. And then I thought I’m not sure I want to go there, if all we’re going to do is sing.

John portrays on the canvass with a brushstroke what we’re going to do in heaven. We’re going to serve our God. We’re going to worship the Lamb on his throne. But what do the details of that brushstroke look like? Might it be that we will sing with perfect pitch and in beautiful harmony, the song of the angels – *Glory to God in the Highest* or *Worthy is the Lamb who was slain* – AND enjoy every moment of it? Absolutely! Might it be that like Adam and Eve in Eden, not with swollen hands or blistered ones, we will till the ground of the “new earth” or plant flowers that will adorn this “new earth” or have some position of oversight of the “new earth”? Certainly! Might it be that whatever job we have, it will be our greatest joy and our highest delight? There’s no doubt about it because you and I, his servants, will serve him. Formally or informally! Publically or privately! Corporately or individually! Unified in purpose! United to praise!

Oh!, but there’s something else his picture of paradise portrays. **They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever.”** (22:4-5) The light that will illuminate heaven is the light God provides. It is the hope and the life he gives. You will experience it directly and for eternity! Think of that! You’re going to stand in God’s light, something brighter and more powerful than the fabricated light fixtures and their fluorescent bulbs being installed in our church building. You’re going to stand in God’s light, something more powerful and breathtaking than the sun God himself created and set in its orbit. In heaven, you’ll experience all of the blessings and benefits the glory of God constantly gives as they radiate from him and are received by you.

For you – child of God, sheep of the Lamb – you are going to reign for ever and ever. You with your God. You with the Lamb. You with all the others – Moses, David, Hannah, Rahab, Elizabeth, Peter, Paul, Martin Luther, the faithful

Comment [g3]: In keeping with the metaphor established in the sermon, it might have been consistent here to portray the scene of Calvary as the black backdrop that highlights the beauty of Revelation 22. Or we could have stayed right within this picture and noted that the Lamb in this painting is one that John has painted before us at other times “looking as if it had been slain” (Rev 5:6,9,12; 13:8).

Comment [g4]: After having in the previous paragraph shared with us a typical child’s fear of heaven as an eternal hymnfest (“How many more songs, mommy?” “Endless!”), Pastor Zahn paints before us a picture of the new heavens and new earth as a perfection of what this life was intended to be. He does so while avoiding speaking with too much certainty about that which must remain mystery until we experience it by sight.

confessors, our dear brother and sister – Rick Roloff and Joan Weaver – all who have died in the Lord – together reigning as saints with their Savior in heaven. Right here, it is portrayed for you!

Paintings are incredible. They tell stories, elicit emotions, make a point, and paint pictures. They rest on easels in painters' studios waiting for the final brushstroke. They hang on walls in museums admired by art enthusiasts or looked at by a couple on a date. They're printed on the pages of history next to the famous names that painted them. But children of God and sheep of the Lamb, on this Sunday of End Times titled *Saints Triumphant*, through the Apostle John's brushstrokes on the canvass of Scripture, your God gives to you *the* perfect painting. It's of what's to come. It's what the dead in Christ already enjoy. **It's what your eyes of faith possess in part now but will fully enjoy in death. Here for you A Perfect Picture of Paradise is Painted for You!** Enjoy its beauty. Its reality is unfathomable.

Comment [g5]: Pastor Zahn hints at it briefly here, but especially with the sobering view of the sin-distorted canvass of my life painted earlier, it might have been good to pursue even more (before the conclusion) how already now this picture of the glory of heaven alters how I view the tattered canvas of my life. We may not have entered the visible glory of the saints triumphant, yet this painting of waiting triumph changes everything for us already now!