

The Rev. Ryan Fischer
St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw
All Saints Sunday
November 7, 2021

Lectionary Year B: Revelation 21:1-6a

In music, hardly anyone begins as a virtuoso. For those who have either played in or heard a performance of a band or orchestra of beginners, this is quite obvious. The beginners' band often consists of squeaky woodwinds, erratic percussion, and flatulent-sounding brass. The beginners' orchestra, where everyone is playing basically the same instrument (just different sizes), tends to be screechy and out of tune. Hardly pleasant to listen to, but good-natured parents, friends, and relatives listen to and compliment these beginners so as to encourage them to continue.

So, why continue?

Well, the answer should be obvious. If a beginner, with sufficient encouragement, continues on with the instrument, he or she will improve in skill, sound, and musicianship...and if a beginner's band or orchestra mates do the same thing, the entire ensemble will improve accordingly. Having done this through my years in school, I experienced this firsthand. By the time I played in my final band concert at the end of my senior year in high school, I was in an ensemble that, as far as I was concerned, sounded pretty good...an opinion that was corroborated by family friends who were musicians themselves.

Somewhere along the way since I graduated from high school, the

concept of skill requiring time has slipped out of many a person's consciousness. Continuing here in the world of music, nowhere is this more evident than with playing the guitar. Having picked up the guitar (first bass than acoustic) years ago, I can say that it has taken exactly that long just to become a mediocre guitarist. But all over the place, people are buying guitars and expecting to play like Eric Clapton or Eddie Van Halen in the course of, oh, a week!

I wonder if some of the blame for that might go to video games like Rock Band or Guitar Hero.

Actually, there are all sorts of cultural influences and realities that have made us less patient and all the more hungry for instant gratification. Today, we can have just about anything short of a Nimitz-class aircraft carrier delivered to our door as long as we pony up the bucks. Of course, technology has influenced this trend tremendously. Once while doing some research in college, the library didn't have the book I needed, so I had to go through "interlibrary loan" and wait three or four days for the book to arrive. Had I been researching the exact same thing as a college student today, I probably could've had what I needed with the click of a mouse. Everything is that way today. Bam...it's right there in an instant.

It's not so much that people are necessarily lazier nowadays, they just don't have the patience it takes to put the time into making something decent, worthwhile, or good. Ultimately, things like

convenience, speed, and portability cause us to gravitate toward things that are quick and disposable. Think of how paper plates and plastic cups eliminate the need for doing dishes; no one really enjoys doing dishes, so we'd rather hurry up and get to whatever else it is that we'd rather be doing. Speedy, yes, but not necessarily good.

The Feast of All Saints, which we celebrate today, calls to mind those baptized, departed servants who died in faith...many of them after living on this earth for eighty, ninety, or a hundred or more years. Eighty, ninety, or a hundred years is neither easy nor speedy, and neither life nor salvation can be bought. So what does that leave us to do?

Have patience, trust, and faith...

If you want to stretch the music metaphor a little more, you could say that God has given you these "instruments" -- to both practice on and commit yourself to a life lived in anticipation of the next life. The easiest way to describe the Christian life is to say that you're bringing a little bit of heaven to those who've known only hell. And by "heaven" I mean a place of justice, peace, freedom, humility, love, and life. If no one can really see us doing any of that, then we've probably just made heaven a place we want to go, without sharing it with anyone else.

Or maybe we want the shortcut to that heavenly home minus the commitment. Maybe we don't have the patience, trust, or faith necessary to devote more time to God. That's kind of hard to swallow,

because these are things God has given us, and if someone gives us something -- for free -- wouldn't we want to at least take advantage of it?

And God gives us even more than that. God gives us a vision...a vision of how things will be, and one that we can carry to others in this troubled world. Think back to our Second Reading from the book of Revelation, where we hear these words: "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away" (21:3b-4).

Now, I've heard a lot of bizarre interpretations of the book of Revelation, but these words lead me to conclusions that are anything but bizarre; rather, they are hopeful. You see, God is demonstrating once again an overwhelming faithfulness -- one that comforts, assures, and gives hope to people who've had it pretty hopeless...even more so than when these words were first heard nearly two millennia ago. On this All Saints Sunday, we remember those people who clung tenaciously to their faith, sometimes because it was all they had. And now they are in that place -- with God, with their tears wiped away, where death is no more.

But were the eighty, ninety, or a hundred years it took to get there necessarily easy? No. And what about those who died younger? Perhaps their shorter lives were filled with pain and

suffering that led to their earlier death. While I still believe that God did all the hard work through Jesus Christ, I have yet to be convinced that the Christian life on this earth ought to be free of inconvenience or sacrifice. God doesn't give us "instruments" for us to stash away in the closet. God gives us instruments for practice and commitment. And if we have neither practice nor commitment, we don't make any music...or, if we do make music, it sounds like beginners' band. That's right -- squeaky woodwinds, erratic percussion, and flatulent-sounding brass.

These things are hardly pleasant to listen to, but a good-natured Parent tracks our progress and encourages us to continue. This good-natured Parent is God. You see, we're not stuck in beginners' band forever. If anything, the One who says, "See, I am making all things new" is leading us into new sounds and skills that are far more melodious than our halfhearted hacking of yore. And he's giving us not just instruments, but also instructors and a vision of how it's all supposed to sound. The instruments are the patience, trust, and faith that are his first gifts. Now, the instructors are the saints who, through their example, show us how the "music" is played. And finally, the vision is the promise of eternal life that we're called to make music with...through telling others about that promise, especially those whose lives haven't appeared very promising.

Yes, God has given us many gifts...so many gifts that, in fact, we are quite a bit more skilled than we think. That's where vision comes into play. My prayer for you is that, together, we may em-

brace the vision God offers through his promise, which, I might add, is not entirely unlike the vision that our pioneers in the faith embraced as they built and sustained churches, communities, schools, businesses, and arts and (yes) music organizations. It is a vision where thriving takes the place of surviving and where the needs of others take the place of the needs of self. It's not instant gratification we're here for...it's long-term commitment.

Even long-term commitment isn't that much...compared to God's. His is eternal. We have the time. We have the instruments. Now let's make the music.

Amen.