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We can see, feel, smell, touch, and taste what is going on here on earth, but how do Christians know what is going on in heaven? Twenty-twenty vision and sensitive hearing do not help us at all to see and hear the mysteries of heaven. As in most spiritual matters, we are completely dependent on God revealing the mysteries of heaven to us through those who wrote the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures by inspiration of the Holy Spirit. And when it comes to heaven, one of the most significant writings that reveals the mysteries of heaven is the Book of Revelation.

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The Lord's Supper as Pastoral Care for the Newly Grieving

Arthur A. Just Jr.

The theological education I received at CTSFW in the late 1970s was excellent, but the one thing they could not teach me at the Seminary was how much people suffered and how much they grieved at the loss of a loved one. In my first parish, I ministered to my family after a tragic death and to the saints in our congregation who suffered from a death in their family. I learned to interpret people's suffering and grief through the sufferings of Christ.

This much I know is true: entering the suffering and grief of others, helping them to carry their sorrow in a way that reflects the truth of the Gospel, comes from walking alongside people and bearing witness to them of the hope we have in Christ.

This much I know is true: entering the suffering and grief of others, helping them to carry their sorrow in a way that reflects the truth of the Gospel, comes from walking alongside people and bearing witness to them of the hope we have in Christ. Those who grieve long to be with their loved ones, whose absence fills their empty house with loneliness. They feel hopeless about a future without father or mother, wife or husband, or, perhaps worst of all, the pain of a future without a young child who was tragically snatched from them by death.

In ministering to a young family whose thirteen-year-old son was diagnosed with an aggressive cancer, I learned the hard way what to say and what not to say to grieving parents. During his surgeries and treatments I helped them endure his sufferings and theirs, speaking to them about how their son was participating in Christ's sufferings through the Lord's Supper. This young boy seemed to understand this better than his parents. He came to long for Holy Communion, receiving it with tears of joy, knowing his suffering body was now eating

and drinking the body and blood of Christ who suffered for him. When I called Holy Communion the medicine of immortality, he understood this better than I. As death drew near, he wanted only to see his parents and me, and he wanted the healing he felt from the Lord's Supper every day, knowing he was going to die soon.

After his death, I accompanied his parents to the funeral home and watched them dissolve in grief as they picked out a casket for their young son. Only as I embraced them in that room full of caskets did I learn that they had never been to a funeral home or a funeral service. During those first days after their son's death, they sleepwalked through the whole ordeal, lost and unsure how to deal with the pain or numbness they were feeling. They did not even know how to describe the grief and emptiness they were experiencing.

At the funeral, I preached a sermon that proclaimed that their young son was with Christ, that his suffering was over, that he was at peace. I described how Christ's suffering had been a comfort to their son,



John Hrehov, "Heaven on Earth," 41" x 29," Oil on Linen on Panel, 2012, Collection: St. Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Fort Wayne, IN.

especially toward the end of his life and as he participated in Christ's suffering through his reception of the body and blood of Christ who suffered and died for him. Now they could look forward to the resurrection of the body when they would see their son again, who would rise with his body; the same body they knew but now made new, a body that had overcome suffering by its communion with the suffering and resurrected body of Jesus.

After the funeral, his father came to me to thank me for all that I had done for them over the many months we spent together during his son's illness up until the moment he died. But then he spoke words to me no pastor ever wants to hear: that my sermon gave him no comfort because his son should not be with Christ but should be here, with him, playing baseball, laughing, studying, and preparing for the great future that lay before him. He was not angry, just enormously sad at the unfairness of it all. As I listened to his hard words, I did not know what to say, because he was right—it was not fair. His son should be here now and not in some eternal life that had no concrete meaning to him on this day of his young son's funeral.

I remember leaving for home, devastated by his words. To this day I'm not sure what led me to go back to him and say what I said. But it was the day that I discovered the angels and archangels and all the company of heaven that has shaped my ministry and my teaching for the last 38 years.

Your son, I said to him, is with Christ. And wherever Christ is, there is heaven with angels and archangels and *all the company of heaven*. I tried to explain to him the meaning of that part of the liturgy, though I myself was only beginning to grasp its full meaning for the first time. His son was now with Christ. When we gather together in our worship here below in Holy Communion with the flesh of Jesus in our liturgy, Christ is present, and with Him are the angels and archangels and all the company of heaven—including his son.

I encouraged him to come to worship the next Sunday, to sing the Sanctus with the saints in our congregation as our voices joined the heavenly choir above.

To kneel at the altar and to receive the body and blood of Christ and, in doing so, be joined to heaven here on earth with Christ and all the saints. The worship of the Lamb in heaven revolves around the same Christ we worship in our church's liturgy. Heaven and earth are not separated by an iron curtain. Both worship the Lamb who was slain and raised again.

Those grieving parents came to church that first Sunday after their son's death. They received Holy Communion with many tears, but they were not alone in crying tears of grief. The entire congregation was caught up in grief, seeing them kneel and receive Christ's body and blood. As this young father hugged me after the service, he said that, in receiving Holy Communion with Christ and the heavenly community of saints and angels, he felt comfort for the first time since he knew that he would lose his son. His son was with Christ, and Christ was here today with all the saints. This, he said, gave him a peace that passes all understanding.

His words were the sweetest words a pastor could hear.

Over the last 38 years, I have shared this story in many congregations. People always come to me afterwards to say they never knew that about Holy Communion. It was the most wonderful good news they could possibly hear, giving them great comfort in the midst of their own grief over the loss of a loved one.

Today, we look forward to that day when our worship and the worship of the angels will merge as the suffering Church joins the Church triumphant at the marriage feast of the Lamb in His kingdom that knows no end. But as we wait, we remember that even now the feast is ongoing, with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven. 🏰

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