

Shadowlands

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I had lunch with a friend of mine a couple of days ago up on Anna Maria Island and he was eager to show me a picture he had on his iPhone. It was a picture of he and his wife standing on the beach here on the west coast and behind them was the setting sun and the sky ablaze with every imaginable color refracted across the clouds. It was a stunning picture – a husband and wife in love, smiles ear to ear, and the heavens declaring the glory of God. He told me he wanted to hold on to that picture for the rest of his life. If not in his iPhone, at least in his mind. It touched something inside of him.

The philosopher Plato in trying to make sense of experiences and moments like this theorized that as real as they may seem to us, these experiences are really but a shadow of something even more real and more true – something that Plato called the Forms. Plato suggested that there was a form of reality beyond what we could see with the naked eye that “informs” our existence, everything that we experience in this world. The Forms, in a sense, cast their shadows upon the world and that our days are days of living in this shadow world – participating the best we can in the small glimpses of something more real, more true that exists in this higher plain of reality. So that whenever we experience goodness and truth and beauty in this world, like my friend on that magic beach, we are simply gaining a glimpse of this greater plain. We are being informed by the Forms.

Fast forward a few hundred years and as Jesus is walking the dusty trails of Palestine he speaks of something called the kingdom of heaven and he says that the kingdom of heaven, though not

visible to the naked eye, is in your midst. The shadows of the kingdom are here for you to experience. Love the Lord your God. Love your neighbor. Do justice. Love kindness. Walk humbly. Hunger and thirst for righteousness. These are the moments when we touch the greater plain. The kingdom. "Seek first the kingdom of God," Jesus said, "and his righteousness and everything else will be added unto you." Christians are people convinced that the way of Christ, the teaching of Christ, the life of Christ, leads us to a greater participation in the true reality – called the Kingdom of Heaven.

So in the book of Revelation, John writes to the persecuted church in what is now Western Turkey – then a region called Asia Minor – and he is quite aware that their efforts to live the Christian life and worship the Christian God are being met by severe persecution and sanction. So John shares with them a vision of the higher plain. The true reality. The Forms. And he reminds them that in heaven the true reality is the worship of God. They worship God day and night. They bow down day and night. They sing Hosannas and blessings day and night. Having been washed in the blood of the lamb, the redeemed community experiences the great joy of praising God. And so John would say that when the church in this world gathers in praise and worship they are participating in the Forms – the kingdom of heaven – the greater plain. That when the organ bellows and stirs our spirits, when a voice lifts us to a heightened sense of the divine, when bells chime us into a period of meditation, when chorales blend a unifying harmony, when the congregation lets forth a hymn of glory – John would say that though these be shadows, we are nevertheless participating in the business of heaven. We are, in a very real sense, rehearsing for the real show.

So we give thanks today for those who led us for years in the rehearsal. John and Judy -- who made it their business to prepare us for that time when all knees will bow and all tongues will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father. Those who gave us a glimpse through the shadows of what the real world really looks like. They will take their place in our pews over the next few weeks and sing along with us. And they will be happy not to have to worry about the microphones and the organ stops and the sheet music – they will be glad just to make their own

joyful noise. Be rehearsed by others. All for the day when all of us will witness what the apostle reminds us it will be:

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."