We are drawing nearer to the conclusion of John’s Revelation. And, in order to put this morning’s passage into proper context, I thought it would be helpful to review the story John’s Revelation has been telling thus far. So, if you will, turn back to the very beginning of John’s Revelation, chapter one. Look at the very first verse: “The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John.” Three things: first, John’s Revelation is foremost a revelation about Jesus, not about the end of the world; second, this is a vision – meaning, as we have amply seen, that it is not a literal blueprint of what is to come and when, but rather a symbolic presentation using images, symbolic numbers, and so forth to tell God’s message; and third, that it is addressed to the churches of John’s day, in John’s orbit of influence. This last is confirmed by verse four – John addresses his Revelation to the seven churches that are in Asia Minor (modern day Turkey). As verse nine reveals, John himself is presently exiled by the Roman authorities to the Isle of Patmos, just off the coast of modern-day Turkey.

The identity of these seven churches who are to receive John’s Revelation are then revealed in chapters two and three: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea – each of whom receives, in these two chapters, a special word of instruction, correction, and blessing from the Holy Spirit. And, as we have seen, the current conditions those seven churches are facing is crucial to comprehending the meaning of John’s Revelation – for each of these churches is facing persecution from the Roman government. Each of these fledgling congregations of Christ are struggling, not just to keep the faith in the face of this persecution, but even to keep their very lives. So, the immediate future, to these seven churches, looks terribly bleak – the very cause of Christ and of His Kingdom seemingly threatened from every side.

And therein lies the central message of John’s Revelation – the central Word God reveals about Jesus Christ and His Kingdom through John’s strange and often mystifying vision. That message to the seven churches being: “Hang on, stay faithful – for in the end, Jesus will win.” That is the whole message of John’s Revelation. In the end, all that opposes Christ and His church will be overcome. In the end, Christ conquers all, and His Kingdom comes. However confusing John’s Revelation may be to us as we read it, however strange and mystifying the images, this is the central revelation to which all of John’s visions are bearing witness. At its core, the Book of Revelation is actually a very simple book, with a very straightforward message: “Hold on, keep the faith – for in the end, Jesus wins!”
In chapters four and five, then, we enter into John’s vision proper of this victory of Jesus. At the start of chapter four, verse one (turn to it, if you haven’t already), a door to heaven opens before John in his spiritual dream. A voice invites him to enter through this door into heaven itself – and not just heaven, but into the very throne room of God Almighty:

> At once I was in the Spirit, and behold, a throne stood in heaven, with one seated on the throne. And he who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian, and around the throne was a rainbow that had the appearance of an emerald . . . From the throne came flashes of lightning, and rumblings and peals of thunder . . . Before the throne there was as it were a sea of glass, like crystal.

But no sooner has John begun to take in this vision of the heavenly throne of the Almighty God, then (chapter five, verses one and two) an angel produces a scroll written within and on the back, sealed with seven seals. We learned that this scroll contains not just the plan by which God wins His great victory in heaven and on the earth – but also that the very act of opening this scroll unleashes that plan, puts it into unstoppable motion. The cry goes up from the angel: “Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?” In other words, who is able to bring about God’s great victory? There is a moment of sadness in verses three and four, because no one in the heavenly court is able to open the scroll, to bring about this triumph. John even starts weeping, until one of the elders around the throne tells him not to worry – because (verse 5) the “Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals.”

And heaven is then hushed as they all then await the revealing of this Lion of Judah, this Root of David, this mighty conqueror. But when the curtain is pulled back in verse six, what is revealed is not a lion but a lamb, a Lamb standing as though it had been slain. And we immediately recognize who He is – He is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world¹. The descendant of David, of the tribe of Judah, the One who gave Himself up upon a cross as the atoning sacrifice for the sins of the whole world. The Lamb of God, who by His death on the cross and by His resurrection from the dead, conquered sin, death, and the devil – and who, therefore, is indeed now worthy to open the scroll, to unleash and bring about the final victory of our God. And suddenly a glorious song breaks out in heaven (verse twelve): “Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!” The song is so glorious, the joy so contagious, that (verse 13) soon every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them joins in this song, until all creation is singing: “To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!” Can’t you just imagine those seven poor, persecuted churches of Asia Minor, fearful and yet faithful, huddling together in some secret meeting place and reading that glorious song! Imagine the thrill of hope and joy rising up within them, even as they faced such difficult days, to learn that the One whom they serve, the One to whom they have given themselves body and soul, has not abandoned them – but is even in that very moment unleashing into history His power by which He will bring about their redemption and ours; indeed, will bring about the redemption of all things: “Worthy is the Lamb who was slain . . . To him who sits on the throne
and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!” In the end, Jesus wins.

And so, at the start of chapter six, the Lamb opens the scroll – and the final victory of our God is set into motion. And it is the unfolding of this victory that we have been dipping into and out of every since chapter six. This is where John’s vision becomes quite strange, often mystifying – but again, what all these images and symbols in the following chapters declare, what they mean, is simply that in the end Jesus wins. Therefore, stay strong, stay firm in the faith, until His final victory comes. In chapter twelve, for example, we read of the Cosmic Christmas – which ends with Christ’s victory in heaven over the great dragon, who represents all that is opposed to God and to His Kingdom – all that which stands in the way of the coming of that Kingdom. The great dragon is thrown down to the earth – look at chapter twelve, verse ten, the second part. The dragon is thrown out of heaven so that he will not longer be able to accuse the people of God day and night before the throne. Now, instead of the constant accusations of the dragon, Jesus Christ (says the Letter to the Hebrews) sits at the right hand of God the Father continually interceding for the people of God.

So the great dragon is thrown down from heaven to the earth where, with his final end clearly in sight, he begins to wreak havoc on those (verse seventeen) “who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus” – meaning those seven churches in Asia Minor to whom John is writing his vision, those churches presently feeling the dragon’s wrath in the form of persecution by the Roman authorities. But then, last week, in chapter eighteen, we read of how all who are in league with the great dragon – Rome/Babylon/all earthly powers and principalities opposed to Christ – how all those aligned with the dragon on earth are to be defeated. The victory cry rises up from their ashes: “Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great!” How it must have comforted and inspired those seven persecuted churches to read of the defeat of their tormentors! But there is also a warning issued to the churches, and to us in our own day (verse four): “Come out of her, my people, lest you take part in her sins, lest you share in her plagues.” It is that warning which sounds all through the Scriptures for the people of God – that we while we may be in the world, we should never allow ourselves to become of the world; that we are to be transformed, not conformed. We belong to the Kingdom of God, not to the passing kingdoms of this world.

Which brings us, at long last, to our passage this morning, chapter nineteen. At this point, remember, the dragon has already cast out of heaven – Christ’s victory in the heavenly places. And also, now, those aligned with the dragon on earth have been defeated, those principalities and powers of darkness and evil – Christ’s victory in the earthly places. All that is left before Christ’s victory is complete, and the Kingdom comes in all its glory, is for the dragon to be banished from God’s Creation once and for all – for everything which opposes God to cease to be in all the heavens and in all the earth. And this is what happens in the second half of our chapter nineteen this morning, as well as in chapter twenty. What began with the Lamb of God opening the scroll back in chapter six is brought to a glorious conclusion, a final victory, by the end of chapter nineteen. The story is completed, the message is declared: stay strong, hold to the faith – because in the end, Jesus wins. The final two chapters of John’s Revelation, chapters twenty-one and twenty-two, then speak of the glorious coming of that Kingdom of God – and we will begin with those chapters starting next Sunday.
But it is the first part of chapter nineteen which is our primary focus this morning – and here we meet with a brief interlude before the final victory of chapter twenty. With Christ having won the victory in heaven in chapter twelve, and having won the victory on earth in chapter eighteen, a celebration now breaks out in heaven at the start of chapter nineteen, in anticipation of that final victory of chapter twenty. Everything is so glorious and good, that the inhabitants of heaven just can’t wait to get the celebration started. “Hallelujah!” they cry. “Salvation and glory and power belong to our God . . . Praise our God, all you his servants, you who fear him, small and great.” The song of triumph is already revving up in heaven, even though the final victory is yet to be won!

But it is the particular form that this victory celebration in heaven then takes (in verses six through nine) which is of greatest concern to us this morning: it is a wedding feast. A wedding feast is being prepared in heaven, in anticipation of this final victory. The invitations have all gone out, the table is being laid, the meal prepared for the Marriage Supper of the Lamb. The Lamb of God, who has won this great victory, is now to get married:

Hallelujah!
For the Lord our God
the Almighty reigns.
Let us rejoice and exult
and give him the glory,
for the marriage of the Lamb has come,
and his Bride has made herself ready;
it was granted her to clothe herself
with fine linen, bright and pure.

A wedding feast, a marriage celebration – and who is His Bride? All of this might seem to us a somewhat strange and unexpected way to celebrate Christ’s victory. Unless, that is, we know that marriage is used throughout the Scriptures to describe the desired relationship God seeks between Himself and His people. The intimacy and the faithful commitment of love between Himself and the creatures He has made in His own image. So, who is the Bride of the Lamb? It is going to be His Church, it is going to be the People of God. It is you and me and all who call upon the name of the Lord. Over and over again, Scripture uses this image of God as the Groom, and of His people as His undeserving, yet cherished, Bride.

Which means for us, this morning, that this wedding feast at the final victory of our God is powerfully revealing of what this whole thing has been about, all along, from the Creation of the heavens and the earth back in Genesis, to the fall of Adam and Eve in the Garden, to the covenant with Abraham and Sarah, to the calling of Moses and the Exodus from Egypt, to David and his kingship, to the prophets and the priests, to Mary and Joseph and that baby born in Bethlehem, to the cross and the tomb and the resurrection from the dead and the ascension into heaven and the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and the birth of the Church – what this whole long business of God, story of God, unfolded in the Bible, has all been about is revealed by this declaration of a wedding feast at the end between God and His People. What this wedding feast at the final victory of our God reveals is the central truth behind it all, within it all, driving the whole thing to its only rightful conclusion – namely, that God is love. That’s what the whole thing is about – even life
itself – that God is love. A wedding feast – the very symbol, the crowning celebration, of love. That’s what the wedding feast at the end reveals – that all along this whole story of Scripture has been about the love of God for His fallen creation. The love of God for His fallen children. The love of God for the ones He created in His image to be His continual companions – the very ones God desires never to be without, never to be apart from ever again, throughout all eternity.

That’s what this whole thing, this whole business of life and death and everything in between, the story of Creation and the story of its Redemption in Jesus Christ – that’s what this is all about: the love of God which just will not let us go, which just will not let us be lost to Him. That love which is willing to pursue us literally to the grave and back in order to woo us back to Himself. A wedding feast at the very end! God’s final declaration of His covenantal love for us – that we should be His, and He should be ours, forever. The Groom taking His Bride to have and to hold, from this day forth and forevermore. This is what the whole story has been about, all along – that God indeed so loves this world, that he gave to us His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life. “In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent us his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.”

Hallelujah!
For the Lord our God
the Almighty reigns.
Let us rejoice and exult
and give him the glory,
for the marriage of the Lamb has come,
and his Bride has made herself ready;
it was granted her to clothe herself
with fine linen, bright and pure.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, how does it feel to be loved like that by Almighty God, our Creator and our Redeemer? If you are stumbling for words to express it, then don’t worry – because John’s Revelation provides our answer: “Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.”

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1 John 1:29.
2 Hebrews 7:25. See also Romans 8:34.
3 John 17:14-16.
4 Romans 12:1-2.
5 I John 4:10.