

THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS

Revelation 7:9-17

All Saints' Day (Series A)

November 1, 2020

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The sermon text for this All Saints' Day comes from *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*, chapter 7, verses 9 through 17. It's a picture of the Church of God in heaven. Please stand as you are able for God's Holy Word. From Revelation 7, beginning at verse 9, we read in Jesus' name.

⁹ After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, ¹⁰ and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" ¹¹ And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, ¹² saying, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen."

¹³ Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?" ¹⁴ I said to him, "Sir, you know." And he said to me, "These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb."

¹⁵ "Therefore they are before the throne of God,
and serve him day and night in his temple;
and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence.

¹⁶ They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore;
the sun shall not strike them,
nor any scorching heat.

¹⁷ For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd,
and he will guide them to springs of living water,
and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

What is heaven like? Here's a glimpse. A multitude, that no one could count, from every nation and tribe and people and language, dressed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands. They're praising God and the Lamb, Jesus Christ. It kind of looks like church. But it's not like heaven is modeled after church. It's the other way. Church—our worship on earth—is modeled after heaven. That means heaven will be better than church.

I realize that still might not sound very appealing, especially to children. Sometimes we do a disservice to our children when we give them the impression that heaven is like one big eternal church service. We're just going to sing and praise God forever and ever. But every four year old is already thinking that an hour is just too long. And now the ten year olds are thinking, *Wait, I was supposed to grow out of that?* Yes, you were. And the twelve year old boys are thinking, *I hope they don't make me sing.*

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Heaven is not going to be one big long church service. There will be other things too. God put us on earth to do many different things, and we will do many different things in heaven too. I don't know exactly what they will all be. But I imagine there will be games, and playing outside, and dancing, and laughing, and jokes, and singing. One thing there will certainly be is lots of really great food. And now you're all thinking, *I wonder what I should have for lunch*. Stop it. It's sermon time. Whatever activities there are in heaven, they will be the perfect versions of what we experience on earth.

There will also be something like church. And we will sing. And we will like it. In fact, we will enjoy it so much that we won't be able to keep from singing. You might not believe me yet.

I'm convinced that deep down everyone likes to sing. And I mean that. Deep down, everyone likes to sing. It's a natural human activity. The problem is that sometimes we start to think we're not good at it, so we get self-conscious about it, and we don't like that feeling. But if you, one, have something to sing about, and two, feel confident about singing, everyone likes to sing. Maybe it happens when you're alone in the car and your jam comes on. You crank it up so loud that you can't even hear yourself. Then you feel confident enough to sing. So you sing, and you like it. It might even just be a slight mumble, but you start to feel the joy of singing. Maybe you're a two year old, so you pretend a drumstick is a microphone, you climb up on the coffee table, and you sing "Wa-doo, wa-doo, wa-doo, wa-doo," for twenty minutes. Ask me how I know that. My point is, if you have something to sing about it, and if you think you're good at it, everyone likes to sing.

I like our singing in church. I think our music is pretty great. I realize I might have a couple advantages there. One, I sit about two feet from the organ speaker, so that probably makes it feel a little more powerful to me. And two, I pick the hymns, so I get to meditate on the text beforehand. But you can do that too. When you come into church, after you sit down, while you're waiting for the service to start, if you haven't already done so, read through the Scripture texts first. But then pick one of the hymns—just one—and read through it. Meditate on it. Think about what it means. I suppose if we don't think about them much, our hymns might just seem like random religious phrases strung together. But they're not. Some of them tell a story. Many of them have a movement from sin, to forgiveness in Christ, to our deaths, and then to eternal life. Notice that movement. Meditate on the text of a hymn. Try to figure out what Scripture texts it's based on. See if that makes a difference in how much you enjoy singing them. I bet it does.

Deep down, everyone likes to sing. And I promise you, when you stand in heaven in your white robe, and you're facing the throne of God, and you're surrounded by millions and millions of other saints in white robes, and there's no social-distancing, and your voice is lost in the thunderous multitude, you're going to sing, and you're going to like it. I promise.

So what's the deal with this uncountable multitude in white robes? First we should say a little bit about the book of Revelation in general. That will help us understand who they are and why John sees a vision of them.

The first and most important thing to understand about Revelation is what the book is about. It's about Jesus. And this comes from the first verse of the book. Revelation is one of the rare books of the Bible that actually gives us the title of the book. Here's the first line of the book: "The Revelation of Jesus Christ" (1:1). That's the title of the book. So it's not *Revelations* with an "s." Sometimes you hear that. That's a common misconception because the book contains a series of visions that John sees. But it's not just a collection of random futuristic visions. Much of it is futuristic, or, at least, it was futuristic from John's perspective in the first century. But all

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of these visions are part of the one, unified revelation of Jesus Christ. So it's not plural, *Revelations*, but singular, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*. And this is important to remember, because some of the modern interpretations of Revelation get so caught up in trying to figure out what every little detail means that they lose sight of the main point. They identify this thing over here as an M1 Abrams tank and this other thing as an Apache helicopter, and they get so wound up trying to crack some code that they forget what the book is about. It's about Jesus. That's the first thing to understand.

The second thing to understand is who it was originally written to. It is a book for us, but it was first written to seven Christian churches around the end of the first century. Chapters two and three contain personal letters from Jesus to each of these seven churches. These were real churches with real people and real problems. That's who the book was written to. So when we get to John's visions in chapters 4 through 22, we remember that the purpose of these visions was to bring the comfort of Jesus Christ to these churches near the end of the first century. So it's not just dealing with events that are still off in the future. Revelation deals, especially, with the tribulation and persecution these Christians would face in the first and second century. And the book continues to be a comfort to us, because those tribulations have continued, and in many places actually increased, right down to our present day. It will continue to be this way until Christ returns. So Revelation is a comfort to Christians who are suffering, because in John's visions we see Jesus opening the seven seals. When these seals are opened, tribulations come upon the earth. Then the angels in heaven blow trumpets, and the trumpets bring more tribulations. Then the angels go and pour out the seven bowls of God's wrath on the earth. All of this brings death and destruction. But there's a strange comfort knowing that all of this comes from Jesus. Because that means he is in control of it all. And Revelation teaches us that he has sealed his saints (7:3). That doesn't mean we won't suffer when tribulation comes on the world. We probably will suffer. But it means that God will protect our faith. The tribulation cannot separate us from God's love.

And then the book ends—spoiler alert!—with the resurrection of the dead and the inauguration of the new creation, where God's saints will live in perfect bliss forever and ever. This was first a comfort to those seven churches, but also to us, because we also live in this world of sorrow, and we are still waiting for that new creation. This is the hope we have in Jesus Christ.

In the midst of these tribulations, John sees this vision of the Church in heaven. There's an uncountable multitude in white robes, along with all the angels in heaven, the twenty-four elders, and the four living creatures. They're all gathered around the throne worshipping God the Father and the Lamb, Jesus Christ.

One thing that's kind of interesting about this vision is that John is in it. Of the twenty-four elders, twelve of them are the twelve apostles (Matt. 19:28; Luke 22:30). So John is actually one of the elders in the vision he's seeing. Theologians call this "The Martyr McFly Phenomenon." Time on earth is not the same as time in heaven. So John can see something in heaven that occurs at the end of the age. So he may also be seeing you and me and the other saints we've known on earth who have fallen asleep in Jesus Christ. All the saints are members of this great multitude.

We learn this when one of the elders asks John, "Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?" (7:13). It's a catechetical question. John answers, "Sir, you know" (7:14). Now this is a wise response. When an important person asks you an important question, it's worth a shot saying, "Sir, you know." So far, no confirmation students have tried this. I think

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they know it won't work. But it works with the elder. He gives the marvelous, comforting answer, "These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb" (7:14).

"These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation." That is, these are Christians who have died. They suffered on earth. Their last suffering was death. And now they have come out of the tribulation and into the heavenly host arrayed in white. They are there together, as one body, praising God.

Death cannot separate God from his beloved saints. Death can separate us from everything else. Death separates our souls from our bodies. It separates husband and wife, parent and child, and every other earthly bond. But it cannot separate us from God. That is because we are baptized into Jesus Christ, who was crucified and risen, passing through death for our sake, so that he might bring us through death as well. The one bond death cannot break is the one holy communion of the saints. This is what we're talking about when we confess in the creed, "I believe in ... the communion of saints." We are confessing that "[God] knit together [his] faithful people of all times and places into one holy communion, the mystical body of [his] Son, Jesus Christ."

So husband and wife, parent and child, may remain one, even when separated by death. But it's not the same kind of bond we have on earth. We remain one with the departed saints, not by virtue of our bond on earth, but by our heavenly bond in Christ Jesus. We remain one as children of God. That means your husband or wife will not be your husband or wife in the resurrection. You will be reunited as children of God. The same is true for your parents, children, friends, and relatives who fall asleep in Christ Jesus.

This is good news, though it may not be the good news we want. Christianity is like that sometimes. That's because we take the good news God gives us, not the good news we think would be best. We're bound to the good news God gives us, because that's the good news that is actually true.

The communion of saints is a stronger bond than any earthly bond. If you have a spouse, or a relative, or a friend who is not a believer, and if they die in their unbelief—and all of us will probably have this happen with someone we care about—they will not be reunited with us in the resurrection. But the saint of God you sometimes see sitting on the other side of the church, whom you've maybe never even talked to, you will be united together with them for all eternity. Our bond as children of God in Christ Jesus is the strongest bond and the only eternal bond. This should also inform the way we live together in this life.

And, of course, for our loved ones who have fallen asleep in Christ Jesus, this is a great comfort. We will be with them in that heavenly host arrayed in white.

Perhaps the most marvelous detail of this vision is the white robes. Everyone is dressed in white robes. These are the same white robes from the parable of the wedding feast a few weeks ago (Matt. 22:1-14). And the big deal with the white robes is how they got white. The elder says, "They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the lamb." Try to compute that in your brain. Blood leaves stains. But this blood removes every stain. Somewhere there's a researcher working for Tide, who also happens to read Revelation a little too woodenly, and he's trying to figure out how to wash clothes with lamb's blood. It's not working.

But this Lamb is Jesus Christ. This is Jesus' blood. And it's not really for your clothes. It's for your soul. Every stain, washed clean by the blood of Jesus. The saints of God do not become

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saints by their own good works. That's not what a saint is. A saint is a sinner who has been set apart by God, for God, and washed clean by the blood of Jesus. That's what a saint is.

The blood of Jesus is strong enough to wash every stain of saint in this uncountable heavenly host. It is certainly strong enough to wash away your sin as well. This is worth singing about. This is why the saints cry out, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb" (7:10).

May God so grant us to follow where these saints have gone. May he strengthen and preserve us in the faith so that we too may stand before that throne and sing praise with them.

And hear the promise of what our God will do for us there.

"He who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence.

They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore;

the sun shall not strike them,

nor any scorching heat.

For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd,

and he will guide them to springs of living water,

and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

(7:16-17).

Amen.

"He who testifies to these things says, 'Surely I am coming soon.' Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!

"The grace of the Lord Jesus be with [you] all.

Amen." (Rev. 22:20-21)