

ALIVE IN CHRIST

Revelation 7:9-17

All Saints' Day

November 6, 2022

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

Ny Stavanger Free Lutheran Church, Buxton, ND

The sermon text comes from *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*, chapter 7, verses 9 through 17. 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.

Dear saints of God in Jesus Christ,

And you are saints. As we observe All Saints' Day together, the first thing we should do is define this word: "saint." Most of the world uses this word wrongly. The National Football League uses it wrongly, but their misuse is pretty obvious. Our Roman Catholic friends also use it wrongly. They use it to refer to a special class of Christian, and even then, only after they die, when they can confirm that the deceased were, in fact, in this special class of Christian. But a saint is not a special class of Christian. A saint is simply a Christian. Every Christian is a saint in the biblical sense of the word. The word "saint" literally means "a holy person." And, to clarify just a step further, because you might not consider yourself to be all that holy: the word "holy" means "set apart." So a saint is not a perfect person. A saint is not even a really good person. A

saint is someone who has been set apart by God. And this is true for every Christian. You have been set apart by God.

Now, whenever something is “set apart,” we should to ask, “What is it set apart from, and what is it set apart for?” It’s like if you have fancy dinnerware. You might set it apart by putting it in a special cabinet. So it’s set apart from pizza night, probably, and it is set apart for special dinners. So when we talk about Christians being set apart, we ask the same question: “What are we set apart from, and what are we set apart for?” God has set you apart from sin and death. You are still a sinner, and we still die. But God set us apart from sin when Jesus took that sin upon himself and died with it. And this also sets us apart from death, because it means death cannot hold us anymore. “The wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23). So when sin is removed, the sentence of death is also removed. So even though we still die, we know that death cannot hold us. This is what we mean when we say that God has set us apart from sin and death.

And we also want to notice what he sets us apart for. He sets us apart from sin and death, so that we might belong to him, and live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness. A saint is a Christian. And Christians are set apart from sin, so that we will have righteousness in Jesus Christ. And we are set apart from death, so that we will have life in Jesus Christ. This is what we gain when God sets us apart from this world and the power of the devil so that we would belong to him. And this gift is for every baptized believer in Jesus.

Now we also need to talk about death. On All Saints’ Day we remember those saints of God who have fallen asleep in Jesus Christ. From this congregation, there were two since All Saints’ Day last year. On November 8 of last year, Debra Johnson fell asleep in Jesus Christ. And then on October 30, one week ago, here, at this very hour, Karen Dalager fell asleep in Jesus Christ. You may and should remember others. I know that many of you are thinking of other Christians who have died in the last year. I won’t try to name them, because, while I know some of them, I am sure I do not know all of them. And you may and should remember Christians who have died more than a year ago. It is appropriate to continue to remember them, because the dead in Christ are not gone, but they are alive in Jesus Christ.

As we remember these saints, we give thanks to God for them. And we especially thank God that he gave them the gift of faith and that he forgave their sin for the sake of Jesus Christ. And we thank God that the dead in Christ are not really dead, but they are alive in Christ. And we thank God that while their bodies are dead now, they will not remain dead forever, but at the Last Day, when Jesus returns, he will raise their bodies from the dead, breathe their spirits back into them, and transform them after the pattern of his perfect resurrected body. We thank God for the certainty of this hope, because Jesus himself “is risen from the dead and lives and reigns to all eternity” (*Luther’s Small Catechism*, “The Apostles’ Creed”).

And so, on All Saints’ Day, we need to talk about death. First, because death touches all of us. People we know and love die. We die. If Jesus does not return first, you will die. Second, because many of you were here last week to see it. You were reminded that death can happen to any of us, at any moment, without any warning. And third, we need to talk about death, because here, at church, we actually have the answer to death. And by “answer,” I don’t just mean a rational explanation. We have that too. We can talk about the fall into sin and how that cursed the world with death. But when I say we have the answer to death, I mean the “solution” kind of answer. We have Jesus Christ, who was crucified to pay for our sin. So I can declare to you, for Jesus’ sake, that your sin is forgiven. And Jesus was raised from the dead, demonstrating that sin

has been paid for. Since death is the penalty for sin, once Jesus has removed that sin, death no longer has the power to hold him in the grave. So he rose from the dead. And he has promised to raise his baptized and believing saints when he returns on the Last Day. That is the answer to death.

So we can talk about death openly and honestly, while the best an unbelieving world can really do is shrug their shoulders and say, “Well, it happens, so we might as well accept it.” We can actually talk about it, and we can talk about it confidently.

We can acknowledge that death is bad. It is not God’s good and gracious will for us. He created us for life, and he intended that life to be eternal. But death came into the world through sin, and it spread to all mankind. Death is bad, and we don’t have to pretend it’s good, because God has promised us something better, even in the midst of death.

So we can also talk about dying well, or what Luther calls in his Small Catechism “a blessed end.” Regarding the last part of the Lord’s Prayer, which says, “But deliver us from evil,” Luther writes, “We pray in this petition, in summary, that our heavenly Father would deliver us from all manner of evil, whether it affect body our soul, property or reputation, and at last, when the hour of death shall come, grant us a blessed end and graciously take us from this world of sorrow to Himself in heaven.”

A “blessed end,” by the way, does not mean that we have a pain-free, peaceful death. It may or may not go that way. But a blessed end simply means that God preserves us in the one true faith until the hour of death, and then he graciously takes us from this world of sorrow to himself in heaven. It means that we fall asleep confessing the faith.

If you were here last Sunday, you witnessed a uniquely blessed end. We talked about this yesterday at the funeral. Many of you were there, so you already heard this, but I find this so marvelous, so I’m going to repeat myself a little bit.

Karen was playing “Jesus, Thy Boundless Love to Me.” That was her last hymn.

And I’m not one to go looking for signs behind every non-burning bush. God speaks to us in his Word. That is how we know him, and that is how we know his will. So we should always seek him in the Scriptures, and we should not look for him in other sources, whether it be dreams, or experiences, or something else. But I have seen a few things that I can’t ignore. And this is one of those things that no one was looking for, but there it was. And we didn’t have to be looking for it in order to see it. So I see the hand of God in this. Consider the last verse of that hymn:

In suff’ring, be Thy love my peace;
In weakness, be Thy love my power;
And when the storms of life shall cease,
Jesus, in that important hour,
In death, as life, be Thou my Guide,
And save me, who for me hast died.

Karen was playing that organ, and you were singing these very words: “And when the storms of life shall cease.” Then the organ stopped. And the storms of Karen’s life ceased. The piano and the voices continued, because no one knew what was happening. And that was good, because there was nothing anyone could have done for her medically, so finishing that hymn, for Karen, was the best thing to do. And I don’t know if Karen was still awake to hear this, or if her hour was already complete:

Jesus, in that important hour,
In death, as life, be Thou my Guide,
And save me, who for me hast died.

And that was Karen's hour of death. Some hours are very long. Hers was very short. And it came while this congregation was praying for a blessed end.

You would have to be a pretty confident atheist to not see the hand of God in this. And, of course, this teaches us nothing new. But it reminds us of these truths that every Christian should have confidence in, but which we doubt, because we are weak. It's what the hymn confesses, that as Jesus has promised to be with us always, he is our guide in life and in death. For, by his death and bodily resurrection, he has already passed through death and into life, so he is with his dear saints to guide us through death and into eternal life.

In this passage from Revelation, the apostle John sees a 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. 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). John answers, "Sir, you know" (7:14). This is a wise response. When an important person asks you an important question, it's worth a shot saying, "Sir, you know." And the elder 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 will bring us through death as well. The one bond death cannot break is the one holy communion of the saints.

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.

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. So for our loved ones who have fallen asleep in Christ Jesus, this is the greatest 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. 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, 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 is washed clean by the blood of Jesus. The saints of God do not become 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 every 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)