

ALL SAINTS

Revelation 7:9-17

All Saints' Day (Series A)

November 5, 2023

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

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The Scripture lesson comes from *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*, chapter 7, verses 9 through 17. It is a vision John has of the glorious scene in heaven, with all the redeemed saints of God gathered before his throne. 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,

This is a vision of your home and of your family. You have a perfect, eternal home, but you are not there yet. You also have an immense, loving, unified, and intimate family. But you only know some of them, and we might not look very unified. These things will be fully realized, but that day is not yet.

This text is very honest about this world. This world is not our home, at least not permanently. It is our temporary home, and we should seek to make the best of it. But we should not love it. And we should not hold on to it too tightly. Why? Because it is filled with suffering, pain, persecution, hunger, thirst, sin, and death. To love this world, and to hold onto this world,

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and to seek the treasures of this world will result in everything that this world finally has to offer: suffering, pain, persecution, hunger, thirst, sin, and death. This is not God's will for you.

We have another world. So, while we endure in this world, we look forward to the world to come.

Over and over again, we learn that, in the end, the only thing this world has to offer us is death. On our way to death, we experience joys and pleasures. These are a gift from God, and they are a foretaste of the world to come. And if we recognize them as such, then we can rightly experience them. But we often fail to see the good things in this life as gifts from God. We mistakenly think they are gifts of the world, without seeing God's hand behind them. Then we start to think that this world can actually satisfy us. But then those pleasures fail or perish, and we mourn as if they are gone forever, because we do not recognize the true source, and we forget his eternal Kingdom.

If this world gives you wealth, but then you lose it on a bad venture, you may think that it's gone forever, and you mourn over what you used to have. Or if you experience great health in your youth, but then you fall ill or you just get old, you may feel like it's gone forever, and you mourn over what you used to be. Or if you have a lovely spouse, tender parents, beautiful children, or faithful friends, but then they are taken away by death, you may feel like they are gone forever, and you mourn over those whom you used to have.

So death becomes the greatest pain of life. The things and people of this world always perish. No matter what this world claims to promise you, it always fails. It always ends badly. If your hope is in this world, I can assure you of disappointment, and nothing else. But if your hope is in the world to come, which is yours through the blood of Jesus, you will certainly be satisfied for all eternity.

The greatest pain of this world is death. We fear it for ourselves. And, unless we're just really materialistic, the death of those we love is the worst pain. This is even true for Christians. And I'm not saying it should be any different. Even though we have the sure and certain hope of the resurrection from the dead and eternal life, we grieve over those who have died. And this is right. We should grieve. Death is bad. Jesus grieved over death. He wept when his friend Lazarus died (John 11:35), even though he was just moments away from calling Lazarus back to life (John 11:43).

Part of All Saints' Day is continuing in this grief. We remember the saints of God who have fallen asleep in Jesus Christ.

A saint is not someone who was extremely pious in this life. That's the way the world often uses the word, but it's wrong. The literal definition of a saint is a holy person. And "holy" does not mean perfect, or even better than average. It means "set apart." A saint is someone who has been set apart by God to belong to him. It is someone who has been set apart from sin, death, and the devil, to receive righteousness from Jesus and eternal life under him in his kingdom. So a saint is simply a Christian. A saint is someone who belongs to Jesus. So when a Christian dies, we don't have to pretend that they were better than they really were. We can't pretend them into heaven anyway. We can remember them the way they actually were, and we especially rejoice in the gift of faith God gave to them and the forgiveness of their sins through the blood of Jesus.

Of course, we remember the good things, because those are the parts we miss. We usually don't miss when their temper would erupt or when they selfishly neglected us. If anything, we might be relieved those things are over. But we mourn the loss of everything good.

On All Saints' Day, we specifically remember those from our congregation who died in the last year. From our congregation, Mavis Woodard fell asleep in Jesus Christ on November 28,

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2022. We thank God for her. We thank God for saving her through Jesus' blood. And we look forward to being reunited in the resurrection on the Last Day.

There are others who had connections to our congregation, like our brother Paul, and there are others. And you may have others that you have known and loved during your life who died in the faith this past year. Remember them on this day.

There are still others who died more than a year ago, like our sister Karen, who fell asleep just barely over a year ago. Many of you still think of that day, especially when we gather for worship. So we still remember her, as we remember all the saints of God, and we continue to mourn their deaths. We can mourn the loss of a person for the rest of our lives. Sometimes we feel like we're supposed to get over it when someone dies. That's wrong. Grief changes over time. Feelings of despair may rise and fall. There's no right amount of despair that you should feel at any given time. And there are deaths that you will feel the weight of more than others.

Grief is good. It's love with nowhere to go. And in a strange way, it's actually a confession of faith, or, at least, it can be. We grieve because something is not right. We know that things are not the way they are supposed to be. That is, we know, in our hearts, that death is not God's will for us. God created life to be eternal. So when sin leads to death, we feel that this is not right. And we know that it is not God's will. But we don't stay there. To stay there would be ultimate devastation. There could be nothing worse than the failure of God's will. The final piece is the acknowledgement that the will of God will be accomplished. If God's will is life for his believing saints, then we can be confident that life will triumph over death. The good and gracious will of God is unstoppable. Christians grieve because, for now, that will is not yet realized. But we grieve with hope, because it will be. We mourn with confidence in the resurrection of the dead.

I don't know how it is for you, but for me this creates a flood of emotions. Sometimes we cry for sadness; sometimes we cry for joy. As a pastor, there are times when I fight tears. And I have to fight them, otherwise I couldn't do my job. Sometimes I fight them at funerals. The graveside service is harder. I fight them when I serve at a deathbed. I fight them on All Saints' Day when we sing "For All the Saints." And I often fight them whenever we sing about the resurrection of the dead. I rarely cry for sadness. But sometimes I cry for joy. Not happiness, but joy. So I often cry at the death of a Christian. And it's not just for sadness. That's part of it, to be sure. But even more so for the joy of the resurrection. There is immense joy knowing that this present sadness will be wiped away. Sometimes I cry when I hear that "God will wipe away every tear from their eyes" (7:17). He will wipe away tears by removing the cause of sadness. He will remove death in the resurrection of the dead.

This might sound weird, but the deeper the sadness is, the greater the joy we have in the hope of the resurrection. The more tragic a death is, the more joy there will be when that death is undone. The more we miss the saints of God who have fallen asleep, the greater the joy when we are reunited on that glorious day.

We get a vision of that day in this passage from Revelation 7. This is a vision of our home and our family. It is "a great multitude that no one could number" (7:9). That's an interesting description, especially for the book of Revelation. Revelation has a lot of numbers, and some of them are big, like 144,000. In the verses just before this, we see 144,000 people of God. These are the saints on earth as they experience tribulation. That's a big number, and it would certainly be difficult to count. It would probably be impossible for any one person to count that many people, but Revelation uses it because there is a significance to it. But when the scene shifts to

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heaven, there is no number. And there is significance to this as well. It's beyond human ability to count. There are saints "from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages" (7:9). Salvation is not only for the Jews, nor is it mostly for them. It is for all peoples.

This multitude is either all Christians of all times, or at least those who are in heaven very close to the end of time. One of the elders says to John, "These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation" (7:14). The Bible describes our entire life on earth as tribulation (1:9; 2:9). And there seems to be a distinction in the very end times when life is described as "the great tribulation." That's when things will go from bad to worse (2 Tim. 3:13). But even if we don't face extreme persecution in this life, we still experience tribulation. We are oppressed by sin and death. The devil rages against us. These are the greatest enemies anyone will ever face. We will come out of that tribulation to be comforted in the presence of God.

The Bible has many different descriptions of heaven, so we're not going to build our entire doctrine on any one description. But each of them give us a glimpse of it. The picture we get here is one of intimacy with God, purity, unity, and joy.

Intimacy with God: This is a great multitude, but no one is far from God. They're standing before the throne and before the Lamb. There's no one in the back row, two miles away, jumping and squinting to see God. But "he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence" (7:15). He's big enough to be near to all of them.

I don't know if you've ever thought about this before. But there are going to be a lot of people in heaven. How much time am I really going to get to spend with Jesus? I mean, if we have to share him with billions of other saints, does that mean I'll only get to talk to him once every couple thousand years? No. He is already near to all of us, and he will be near to all of us in the new creation. God is infinite. That's his nature. And Jesus, as the Son of God, shares that same divine nature. We might think that, since he also has a human nature, that he is confined to one place. But that is not true now, and it will not be true in the world to come. The human nature does not limit the power of Christ's divine nature. He is still capable of everything he possesses by the divine nature. So we will all have the closest access to Jesus, along with the Father and the Holy Spirit.

Then there are the white robes. These robes demonstrate both purity and unity. The beautiful thing about the white robes is how they got white. "They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb" (7:14). It's such a beautiful description, because that is so obviously not how you wash clothes. But the blood of Jesus removes every stain. It's talking about something much more important than your clothing. It's talking about our souls, which have been stained with sin from the day we were conceived. But Jesus Christ, "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29), was slain for you. He shed his holy and precious blood on a cross outside Jerusalem. We were stained with sin. He was pure and innocent. So he suffered and died an innocent death for our sake. And now his blood cleanses every sin.

The white robes are also a picture of unity. It's like a sports team, all wearing the same uniform. We're still individual people. There are still black people and white people, there are still people "from every nation, from all tribes and people and languages," but those things don't divide us in heaven. We're wrong to let them divide us on earth, but that division is completely impossible in the new creation, because everyone there is washed by the blood of Jesus, and that is the basis for our unity. The greatest truth of every Christian is that we are cleansed by Jesus' blood. And it is that cleansing that makes us one.

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And then the people of God respond with rejoicing. They're near to God, they are cleansed, and they are one. So they rejoice and praise God. The only other place in the New Testament that mentions palm branches is in John's gospel, where he records Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. There the crowd rejoiced that their king had come to them. That was just a few days before Jesus offered himself as a sacrifice for sins. In heaven, we will rejoice over what Jesus rode into Jerusalem to do. We will cry with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne and to the Lamb!" (7:10). The angels will also join in worship. What a magnificent choir that will be. Even if you don't like to sing now, you will like it then.

This is one of several pictures of heaven in the Bible. So we don't conclude that this is all heaven will be like, but it will be part of it. We learn that we will be near to God, and he will shelter us with his presence. In verse 16, we learn that we will no longer hunger or thirst. And this doesn't just refer to food and drink. In this life we hunger and thirst in many ways. We might long for relationships, for peace, for meaning and purpose. We might long for comfort and relief from pain. We long for an end to temptation and sin. In this world, we live with perpetual longing. We get momentary and partial fulfillments, like when you eat a good meal, but we always get hungry again. Nothing in this life satisfies us perfectly or permanently. We are constantly hungry or thirsty for something, and we often look for satisfaction in the wrong places. We should look to the new creation for our satisfaction. When God promises that we will "hunger no more, neither thirst anymore," it means that all of our longings will be fulfilled as only he knows how.

"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).

We long for that world, and we long to be reunited with all who have fallen asleep in Jesus Christ. Even as we await that glorious day, we are assured by God that our robes are white. The blood of Jesus has cleansed us from sin. And we are already one with all the saints of God, because we are united with them in Jesus Christ, and "He is not the God of the dead, but of the living" (Matt. 22:32). We are still one with the saints who have gone before us.

This is one of the ways the sacraments comfort us. You are baptized into Jesus Christ. You are one with him. And if you are one with him in Baptism, then you are also one with all the other saints of God who have been baptized into him.

And in the Lord's Supper, we all receive the same body and blood of Jesus. There is one body of Christ. We don't receive different Christs. We receive the same body and blood that all Christians around the world receive. It is the same body and blood that our ancestors before us received. Those saints of God, who now wear white robes, received the same Jesus. And so, in a mysterious, sacramental way, as we commune with Jesus in the Lord's Supper, we commune with all the saints of God throughout all time. And we commune with the same Jesus Christ, while they stand in his presence in heaven. As we have union with Jesus Christ, we have union with all the saints of God.

And we long for that day in that new world, where all the gifts of God will be fully realized. We will stand in white robes, united with one another, and will all the saints of God. Amen.

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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)