

Pastor Joe Polzin  
Revelation 7:9-17  
“A Vision of the Saints”  
Year C – All Saints’ Day (Observed)  
November 3, 2019

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

It’s that time of year again, when the air gets colder, the leaves turn colors, and just before they all come down so you can get your raking done, Northern Michigan gets its first annual snowfall. Seems to be the way fall goes up here.

And speaking of fall, this past week, of course, was Halloween, which we Lutherans know is also Reformation Day. And the very next day, November 1<sup>st</sup>, was All Saints’ Day. I always think it’s interesting that the two days, Reformation and All Saints’, are side by side. Historically, of course, we understand why. The 95 Theses were posted by Martin Luther on the Wittenberg church door on the eve of All Saints’, a day when everyone would be coming to church and would see the information he posted there.

But later on, celebrating saints became a bit of a thorny issue for those early Reformers. They had to decide what to do about saints, especially since some sketchy practices had risen up over time. Things such as over-the-top parties around martyrs’ graves, or offering prayers to saints to escape various kinds of sufferings, or hearing fantastical stories about their lives, or even placing one’s trust in the merits of the saints for salvation. The Reformers of the sixteenth-century were rightly concerned about these abuses, and how focusing on the saints like this could replace the preaching about God’s great work, the work in his Son, Jesus.

But still, those early Lutherans knew, and we know as well, that we need an All Saints’ Day. Not the kind that’s misguided and misdirected, like the celebrations of the past. But rather, the kind that gives us a vision of God’s grace. A vision of God’s work. A vision of perseverance and of hope. A vision of a final victory for all of God’s saints, which includes both you and me.

How important it is to have that vision in our lives, especially since this is not the kind of vision that our world gives us. No, the vision this world paints before our eyes is the kind of vision we see everyday in the news. One that has more defeat than victory. One that has more hopelessness than hope.

As sensationalistic as the news can often be, embellishment isn’t really necessary, is it? We know that the reality of life in this world is bad enough on its own. We hear daily of the violent protests in Hong Kong; the ongoing and long-suffering wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Ukraine, or the civil wars in South Sudan or Syria; the counter-strikes against deadly terrorists; the rampant and raging wildfires in California, which seem to crop up anew every year... I don’t need to list all of the headlines for you. You know them, and soon, whether it’s tomorrow or the next day or the day after that, they’ll all be replaced with new protests, new wars, new calamities, and new conflicts. The turmoil never seems to end.

And these struggles aren’t just limited to the headlines. The vision this world gives us is cluttered with the innumerable trials and sufferings that we *personally* go through day after day. Affliction and brokenness experienced not just every once in a while in rare circumstances, but quite commonly and regularly, in our families, in our lives, and in our homes. Whether near or far, whether in the periphery or in the very center of our vision, at times it seems we cannot escape the tribulations of this world.

And that's why, in part, we so badly need an All Saints' Day. Because now, today, we are given this text from Revelation 7. And what it shows us is a strikingly different vision than what we have in this world. So, let that scene wash over you for just a moment. Look at this vision that the Apostle John sees:

A vast sea of people that you could never count, shimmering in the light of God's throne. A multi-colored multitude, stretching across the heavenly horizon, from every nation, every people, every language. Who are these, these people clothed in white robes, and from where have they come? These are the ones who have come out of the great tribulation. That's good. To come *out* of tribulation. Not just to get stuck in the mire of it, but to go through it, and to come out of it on the other side. And that is a beautiful thought.

To put it simply, what we see on this All Saints' Day are the saints, the people like you and me, who made it. The saints who have fought the good fight. They persevered. They finished the marathon of life here on earth. And if they can do it, then maybe we can too. So, what is their secret? How did they do it?

There's this quote from Robert Louis Stevenson, the author known for writing *Treasure Island*. He was writing about saints and sinners, and he said, "Saints are sinners who keep on going." In other words, a saint isn't a person who, while they are going, are perfect. A saint is a person, who while they are going, makes mistakes, but doesn't allow that to stop them, and they keep on going. And there's somewhat of an appealing notion to that, appealing to a certain work ethic in life. That if we work hard and keep our head down, we'll get to where we're supposed to be.

But is that what God is telling us today? That in order to achieve the vision that John saw, that *we* see today, we are simply to endure this time of suffering, one tribulation after another, because if we just "keep on going," we'll eventually get to the good stuff? That by our striving, by our living as Christians, and just by doing what we're supposed to do, that we'll be allowed to join this vision of the saints?

Well, the answer is no. Because although it's appealing to our sinful human ego to think that there's something we do that will earn us a spot in the heavenly multitude, that's not a truthful vision at all. That's a mirage. And we know it, even if we try to deny it. Because the great tribulation that is our life here on earth is not something that we can conquer on our own. We cannot conquer our own sin. We cannot conquer our own suffering. We cannot even conquer our own death. Left entirely up to us, we would be left in the dust as sinners.

So what makes a saint? How can we trust that this vision of the saints is a vision for us? Well, that's the answer God's Word tells us today. "These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb" (9:14). This is the good answer, the answer that gives and strengthens our faith. There is only one way out of the great tribulation, and it is not by our saintly activity or the things we do. It is only through the blood of Christ, through what Christ has done for us in his death and resurrection. To modify Stevenson's quote just a bit, saints aren't sinners who keep on going, but rather, "Saints are sinners who keep on going because Christ has already gone for us."

God gives you this vision of the saints today so that you can see with your very own eyes, that on the distant shore of the life to come, on far side of our current sorrow, is the white resurrection robe of Christ's victory over sin and death that is waiting for you. The robe that will be given to you because he has conquered all your sins, all your sufferings, and even your death. That's what he's done for his saints, for all those whose robes have been washed in the blood of the Lamb.

Now, All Saints' Day is also the time when we remember those who have gone before us, and we remember and give thanks to God for the example of their faithfulness. We should follow their example. We, too, can labor to relieve suffering, to imitate Christ and bear one another's burdens, to tend to the hungry and thirsty, to give to the needy, and to comfort those who mourn. We can and should do all those things. That's what the saints of Christ do.

But we also always remember that, though the examples of the saints' striving and struggling is inspiring, in the end it is not their striving that brings them out into the bright country of Revelation 7. It is God, and God alone, who sits on his throne and who will shelter his saints with his presence, who will feed them and give them drink, who will clothe them with his righteousness, and who will take the tears that were shed, from the racking sobs to the long and quiet tears of grief, and he will wipe them all away.

Which means, what give us life here and now, what keeps us going, what strengthens our weak hands and makes firm our feeble knees, what gives us everlasting and undying hope, is not our work. It is the work of God. That's what this vision of the saints gives us. It's a vision of God who serves and strengthens his saints forever.

There's this little anecdote about Johann Sebastian Bach. Supposedly, his children figured out that the easiest way to wake up their father, who was a notoriously difficult person to wake up, was to play a few lines of music, but then leave off the last note. And when they did that, he'd jump up immediately and go to the clavichord and strike the final chord, resolving that which was left unresolved.

That's what we have here in Revelation 7. We hear *our* final chord. We witness the final note of God's masterpiece. Right now, we wait and we strive and we struggle in the unresolved issues of this world, while we long for the resolution God will bring, the conclusion of his work in our lives. And on that final day, we *will* see the bright landscape of Paradise restored, and we will hear it. We will listen to the final triumphant song of the divine symphony, a song in which, amazingly, we find that we will have a part written just for us.

As we sang in our hymn, *For All the Saints*, "And when the fight is fierce, the warfare long, steals on the ear the distant triumph song, and hearts are brave again, and arms are strong. Alleluia! Alleluia!" What is the distant triumph song? What is it that reaches our ears today? What is that final chord that we anticipate is coming? Well, I think it goes a little something like this:

The multitude cried out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen" (7:10, 12). In Jesus' name. **Amen.**

And now may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. **Amen.**