

All Saints Sunday (a)
Revelation 7:9-17 1 John 3:1-3 Matthew 5:1-12
Saint John's Lutheran Church, Grove City OH
November 1, 2020 (Traditional)

I remember, in high school, a bunch of my friends and I were at a sleepover, and I don't know who got this idea, but about three in the morning, we turned off all the lights, lit a candle and took turns reading aloud the entire book of Revelation. By the time the sun came up, all of us were scared out of our wits. But you know, for all the disturbing stuff in Revelation about the end of the world, there are just as many incredibly beautiful scenes of worship and praise...like the one today for All Saints.

In the middle of all the violent destruction that's going on in the book, there are these sections where it's like the curtain opens and we see behind the scenes. We see past all the terrible misery that's happening in the world, beyond all the destruction and sorrow—to a vision of heaven. And there, Revelation shows us, the saints are singing, in the middle of it all. “A great multitude that no one can count, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands.” And they're worshipping, crying out with a loud voice: “Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!” They're ecstatically singing with all the angels and elders around the throne: “Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever!”

So while the world is passing away, a victory song is soaring up through the entire book of Revelation, from those “who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.”

I mean, right there: isn't that a beautiful picture—worth a thousand words—of how we live our lives in Christ? Right here in this room today, we are singing praises to God; we have been washed clean in the blood of the Lamb. We know this world is passing away. There will be a day when we say goodbye to all of this. No more election cycles. Like everyone else we will experience death—the heartbreaking separations, the funerals, the sicknesses. Like everyone else we will see all the same old evils happening again and again in the world. We'll see violence and war and hatreds, resentments between people that never seem to go away—all those things Revelation talks about. We're part of that world. That world that's dying. We're going to feel all those hurts. It's real.

But as believers, as Paul says, we've been buried by baptism into the death of Jesus. There's a big difference between dying on our own, and dying in Christ. Buried with Jesus, we've been reborn into a world that's bigger than the dying one that we see with our eyes. In Jesus, the curtain has been opened.

We now have a direct connection with those saints who are singing God's praises in Revelation. We're part of them now, we're worshiping God with them, right here in Grove City. In our baptism into Christ, it's like we start every day as empty vessels, to be filled up with that eternal life that is going to last beyond all the destruction. You and I can live out of that beautiful future already, here and now. Think of it, when we worship together, we're already singing that song of victory right here, today, with all those saints! The world will pass away, but the song of praise to God and to the Lamb, which you and I lift here together here at St. John's...this is never going to end, the praise will go on. In Christ we have been made citizens of the new world that's coming.

It blows my mind, that every time I receive the bread and wine from the altar here, I know I'm connected through Jesus Christ not just with you all...but we're surrounded here by those countless saints of all times and places. God is making his eternal throne here with us, right here in Grove City. Right here, right now, we're surrounded by a cloud of witnesses, an army of angels. We can know we have that protection. The world can be falling apart all around us. But the one who is seated on the throne will shelter us. We have that security in God, we have a divine peace that the world can't give us. We could lose all our possessions, our money, our lives. But Christ has given us a totally new vantage point from which to view all of that: we're going to lose it anyway, so life becomes a kind of daily process of letting it go and giving it all away. It's not worth comparing with what's coming to us. We're part of this dying world, but we don't belong to it. That means we're free to love it with everything we've got. And when the time comes, we can let it go.

The other beautiful thing about All Saints Day, of course, is that this is personal. I know my mom and dad are here with us right now. They are alive in Christ, and they will come to this table with us today. Your special saints will be here too. Think of all those believers in your lives who showed you the way, who brought you to Christ. Think of that youth leader, maybe, who repeatedly, persistently nudged you towards Jesus. Or that Sunday school teacher who not only taught you about Jesus but who also loved you like Jesus, as well as he could. Think of that saint who sat there by your hospital bed. The Christian friend who listened to you when you went through that horrible time. The church member who hugged you when your mother died and told you she'd be there for you. That one sermon you heard from that pastor that day, and it was like, it was written for you. The passage you read from the bible that time, which changed your life. The book you read by that Christian author.

That's is how God works. Always has! You and I would not know Jesus except for the witness of the everyday saints who introduced us to him. He doesn't write messages in the sky; he gives us his message and he gives us his own life through flesh and blood people. All Saints Day is when we really lift that up

and acknowledge it. The Holy Spirit creates faith; he does all the work. But he works *through* the people of God. It's my mom and dad, my pastors and Sunday School teachers and Christian friends; it's the witness of the bible—the people of God—The Spirit is using those flesh and blood instruments, to tell me about Jesus, opening up that beautiful future for me in this world of decay and death.

And are those people perfect? Were my mom and dad perfect? No, they had plenty of faults. They have no magic abilities. But here's the truth: when normal people take hold of this identity we've been given in Jesus, when we claim our citizenship in heaven, when we act out of that new place in life; we become instruments of God. Sometimes we fall back into that old life where the fear of death and loss rules us. But that doesn't take away from what God has done for us in Christ. He's chosen us; he's marked us as his special possessions, his own children. When I fall back, I can always remember my true, my most basic identity. I can remember the One I belong to.

In the book of Revelation, what does God tell us about creatures of the old world? How do they live? How do I spend my time, when I'm a creature of that old world? In a nutshell, they spend their lives desperately trying not to die, but like everyone, they die anyway. As creatures of the old world, it's all about holding on to what we've got, it's all about fearing that future that's coming. It's all about hiding ourselves, and keeping ourselves secure. Or, we're grasping for whatever political power we can get. We can spend our lives trying to hide our weaknesses and our brokenness and sins from other people, and making ourselves look squeaky clean. At core, it's a life of survival and self-preservation, and it's exhausting. Exhausting is the best thing you can say about it. It doesn't make for a very giving, loving, generous life. Ultimately, there's no joy in it. Whatever shape it takes, it ends in death and nothingness.

But now, dead and buried in Christ, we can live out of this new identity he's given us, and we can show everyone what the final victory looks like. We can shine out God's future in everything we do. We don't have anything to lose anymore. We don't have anything to fear anymore. Now we're open to a life of joy and grace and surprises. Now we can start living and loving and giving everything we've got. Like those saints we admire, we've got no magic abilities. Like them, we're just starting from a different place in life. We're starting with Christ. Like them, we can put ourselves aside and can start living a big beautiful life.

Today let's remember, and thank God for the saints who have loved us and guided us into this new life in Christ. And let's pray and think about how we can best shine out the Way, the Truth, and the Life to the people around us.