

November 6, 2022
All Saints' Sunday

The Lessons: Revelation 7:9-17
 Psalm 149
 1 John 3:1-3
 Matthew 5:1-12

The Hymns: # 677 *For All The Saints*
 # 676 *Behold a Host, Arrayed in White*
 # 949 *Heavenly Hosts in Ceaseless Worship*

The Collect:

Almighty and everlasting God, You knit together Your faithful people of all times and places into one holy communion, the mystical body of Your Son, Jesus Christ. Grant us so to follow Your blessed saints in all virtuous and godly living that, together with them, we may come to the unspeakable joys You have prepared for those who love You; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

The Sermon:

“Who Are These?”
 Revelation 7:9-17

The Word of the Lord from Revelation 7: “Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?”

Dear Friends in Christ Jesus,

Who are these? We have the description throughout our text, and it’s all good. They make up a great multitude that no one can number. They are from all nations—the same words that Jesus used when He said to His disciples, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:19); and indeed, they are from all tribes and peoples and languages, because the Lord declared that His Word would go forth to all the world.

It’s not a small number. It’s a great multitude. The Church always seems to look like the scattered few near extinction in this world, but God will have His people—too numerous to count!

They are standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They are clothed with white robes and they are holding palm branches in their hands. Waving palm branches only pops up twice in Scripture: Palm Sunday and here, in Revelation 7. On Palm Sunday, the people waved palm branches as Jesus entered Jerusalem on a colt, the foal of a donkey. They were shouting, “Hosanna”—“save us now!”, and “Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord.” Jesus was riding into Jerusalem with purpose, to save. In a few short days, He would be raised up on a cross for His throne as He died for the sins of the world. But now, while the palm branches are the same, everything is different—it’s fulfilled. Instead of the cross, there’s a real throne. Instead of the Savior preparing to sacrifice, He is now

present as the resurrected Lamb who had been slain. Rather than throwing down their garments in service to Him, they are wearing white robes that He has given to them. And instead of crying out, “Save us now!,” they declare that He has: “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!” It’s done. The cross is over. The victory is the Lord’s.

Who are these? They’re in pretty special company: they’re standing with angels around the throne. The elders are there, too—the twenty-four elders, perhaps the twelve apostles and the twelve patriarchs, who have thrones and crowns of their own. So are the four living creatures. This rather elite choir continues the song that they started singing in Revelation 5: “Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.” All of this belongs to Him. Amen. Let it be so.

Who are these? One of the elders asks John, “Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?” When John fails to answer, the elder explains, “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. 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.”

So, they’ve come out of the great tribulation. Some will tell you that this refers to a special seven-year time period just before the end of the world, but that’s some fanciful interpretation. There’s no denying that things will be worse before the end: the way that Revelation describes it, there will be a huge church that claims to be Christianity but has actually denied the Gospel, as well as a world that’s pretty well completely rejected Christ, and neither of them will favor those who hold fast to the Gospel. Kind of like today.

However, a more sound interpretation of “great tribulation” is simply this: life in this world is always a time of great tribulation for the people of God, ever since Adam and Eve fell into sin. The multitude in heaven is a gathering of those who are no longer on earth, but stand before the throne of God in heaven.

And why are they there? Because they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Blood and white robes don’t normally go together—in fact, bloodstains are often the worst to remove. In this case, though, the Blood of the Lamb has removed every stain and spot of sin from the robes of this crowd—not just from one or two, but from the entire multitude. They are holy and clean before God, their robes white, because Christ has paid for every last one of their sins.

Where are they? They are “before the throne of God,” but the throne is not empty. They are in the presence of God, with “He who sits on the throne” and “who will shelter them with His presence.” The word for “shelter” there is an important one: it’s also the word for tent or tabernacle. Back in the Old Testament, the tabernacle was God’s temple in the wilderness as the people of Israel journeyed to the Promised Land. God dwelt with His people in the Holy of Holies, the inner room of the tent. He concealed Himself there because they couldn’t see His glory and live: stained and unholy with sin, they couldn’t be that close to Him—He had to hide for their good. Now, in Revelation 7, He shelters them with His presence. In other words, they’re inside the tent, inside the Most Holy Place, with Him. That’s what heaven is—life in the glorious presence of God forever. They can be in His presence

because the Lamb has made them clean with His own blood, because He became flesh and tented among them in order to save them from sin.

They are in the presence of God because they're holy, and only holy things can be in the presence of God. That explains what's not in the vision: hunger, thirst, scorching heat, sadness. Our text concludes, "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 every tear from their eyes."

So who are these? Who makes up this great multitude from all nations, gathered around God's throne with the elders and the living creatures? Who has the honor of being that close in white robes, waving palm branches and singing praises to the Lamb? Who are these, delivered from the great tribulation, never to suffer sin, pain or affliction again?

Who are these? Along with the rest of God's people, they are you.

You are among those whom God has gathered in from all nations. You are cleansed with the blood of Christ, and you wear the white robe of His righteousness, because all who are baptized into Christ have put on Christ. What you see in the text is your future. This is not a possibility or one of several endings: this is what Christ has redeemed you for.

Christ has redeemed you for eternal life in the presence of God. That sounds a bit abstract, but consider it this way: it's like life in the Garden of Eden before the fall into sin. There, man could stand in God's presence and God came to walk with man. There, because there was no sin, there were no wages of sin—no hunger, no thirst, no pain, no tears. Sin brought all of this as part of its curse. Christ came and defeated sin, suffering the hunger, the thirst, the pain, the tears and all of God's judgment for sin. In doing so, He reversed the curse. Because He has won salvation for you, your sins are forgiven. Heaven is yours...and heaven means being in the presence of God, the Giver of all good things, for eternity. That is how God designed things to be in the first place.

In contrast, hell would be where God is not—or at least where God is not present with grace and mercy. For those who want nothing to do with God, they receive what they want—though they will find an existence completely without God to be a terrible thing indeed. If God provides food, health, protection, order and deliverance out of His grace and mercy, will these things be found if God is not present with His grace and mercy? No.

But hell is not for you. You've been washed clean by the blood of the Lamb. Your future—your eternity—is life in His presence, with every good thing. That is what God offers to all people through His Son Jesus Christ, so that all who believe in Him might be saved from hell and delivered to heaven.

For now, you're neither in heaven or hell. You're in this world, sort of in between. There's a bit of hell here, because you still witness the wages of sin with the sickness, the troubles, the anxiety and everything else that contributes to great tribulation. But this world is not hell, because God is still present in this world. There's a bit of heaven here, too, for precisely that reason: God is present with you, as near as His means of grace. He's clothed you in that white robe of righteousness in your baptism, He keeps speaking you clean with His absolution, and He gives you a foretaste of the feast to

come in His Supper. But this world is not heaven, either: God is present, but God must still conceal Himself in words and water, bread and wine. He must do so because sinners can't abide His glorious presence and live. So for now, you're between heaven and hell, enduring in a world that features both hellish tribulation and heavenly grace.

The point of Revelation 7 is to remind you of your future. This world is not the end or your final destination. Your place in that multitude around God's throne is already secure because the Lamb has already shed His blood for you and forgiven you for all of your sins. Like an heir of a fortune in the car on the way to the reading of the will, it's only a matter of when, not if; the inheritance is yours. You just don't see it yet.

The only thing that would keep the heir from the inheritance would be if he jumped out of the car and ran away. That's the only ploy the devil has left for you—to get you to run away from God's gifts of forgiveness and heaven, and to choose sin—and eventually hell—instead. He'll try to make sin look attractive, and your sinful flesh will want to cooperate and choose the sin over grace and the Promised Land. He'll try to make you doubt God's presence and believe you're God-forsaken and already in hell, though this world is still so visited by God that we cannot have a true idea of what hell is really like. But once again, as last week, Revelation 7 is written to Christians who are being ground into a fine powder by suffering, by trial, by tribulation.

And again, compared to you and your strength and abilities, the tribulation you face is great.

But Christ is greater, and here's the proof: all of the tribulation you face is a result of sin and designed to lead you to death. But Christ has already conquered death. He's emerged from the tomb, never to die again; and if He's conquered the greater enemy—death itself, He is certainly greater than the tribulation that afflicts you.

So once again, by the grace of God, hold fast in Him. This time of tribulation will cease, because it is already defeated. Everything that has power to separate you from God has been gutted at the cross. Eternal life in His glorious presence is already yours, where there will be no hunger, thirst, scorching heat or any other suffering anymore. Those things can't be there, because they are the result of sin. You will be there, because Christ has taken away your sins. For His sake, God will wipe away every tear from your eyes.

We pray that the Lord would come quickly and deliver us from tribulation. But however long the Lord tarries in His wisdom and mercy, you have the vision of Revelation 7. You know the end of the story. Eternal life—delivered from every sin and every consequence of sin—is yours, because you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.