

Revelation 7:9-17, 2017, All Saints Sunday

9 After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. 10 They cried out in a loud voice, saying, “Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!” 11 And all the angels stood 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 singing, “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, robed in white, and where have they come from?” 14 I said to him, “Sir, you are the one that knows.”

Then he said to me, “These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. 15 For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them. 16 They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; 17 for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

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This is All Saints Sunday;

all saints—those we remember throughout the ages and those of our own families who have passed on to be with our Lord,

those who are nourished by the springs of the water of life and gather around the throne of God in heaven,

and those still living—who gather round the baptismal font and the table and meal of Christ here,

and at fonts and tables around the world.

I don't know what Pastor VandeMark was thinking or from where his inspiration came when he gave this name to our church,

but what a great gift it is that we can be reminded of all the saints,

that we might be able to recall this vision of the heavenly throne room each time we say the name *All Saints Lutheran Church*

and there again find unity and hope, and be strengthened for faith and life.

This week I had questions about this passage from Revelation.

I wondered how it contributed to the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus the Christ,

how does it teach or make Christ known.

These are not original questions.

Martin Luther had the same concerns about this letter written to the churches in Asia by John late in the 1st Century.

In Luther's final judgment this letter didn't have anything to offer the gospel proclamation because

As he said, "Christ is neither taught nor made known".

But other scholars since him have found value in this letter.

For us to understand this letter today it is important to understand what it meant to the people John was writing to in the first century, to understand John's purpose in writing it.

First off the letter was not intended for private reading but to be read aloud as the community of faith gathered in praise and prayer.

In fact there are those who believe that the way in which to get the most out of the letter today is to gather the people together in the church sanctuary,

sing a hymn of praise and then listen as the letter is read in its entirety by a good reader.

Can you imagine?

On the one hand your immediate reaction to that suggestion might be one of dread at the notion of even sitting through that entire reading.

On the other hand, the possibility of being able to picture in your mind the imagery of this letter and how exciting this could be.

But it is more likely you would want to wait for the movie to come out.

It is important to realize that this mysterious, scary and confusing letter was not so to the first century people.

They understood the message, and they understood it because it was written to them in that very particular time, place and situation.

In the reading for today John describes those who are gathered before the throne of God as those

“who have come out of the great ordeal, they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.”

Their lives are then changed forever. The lamb at the center of the throne becomes their shepherd,

no more hunger or thirst, hot sun, but a life nourished by the springs of the water of life,

and God wiping away every tear from their eyes.”

There is the revelation of Christ in the vision of the Lamb leading his people to the fullness of the promise of everlasting life—a fullness beyond our comprehension.

What was this great ordeal John writes about in the first century?

The Christians of that time had experienced the catastrophic war with Rome as Jewish rebels were defeated in about 70 AD.

The temple in Jerusalem was destroyed, Jerusalem sacked and the people, both Jew and Christians scattered throughout Asia.

This led also to tensions between Christians and Jews and often times open conflicts.

They had problems to face that others did not.

They were considered part of a sect that appealed to the lower class, had no long history or glorious institutions.

They were considered to be largely unpatriotic as they would not vow allegiance to the emperor

and atheists as they would not participate in the worship of the many God's of the typical Roman community.

They were considered cannibals, after all they talked about eating flesh and drinking blood and their leader was crucified! Christianity was a cult!

While there may not have been an organized system of persecution they were subject to social and economic discrimination, community tensions and harassment,

mob violence and plundering of property, being treated like outcasts of society sometimes even martyred for their belief.

Christians were in a transition process internally having lost many of its original apostles and leaders.

They were trying to sort out their identity and needed the emergence of a solid structure.

These were people who were committed to their beliefs and needed hope, reassurance and encouragement. That was John's purpose.

In the first century the end was supposed to be coming soon; so just hang in there a little while longer!

You too will make it through this great ordeal and will find yourself before the throne of God.

Is it any wonder we have such trouble grasping the meaning of this letter?

While there are slight similarities this is nothing like the world we live in.

But that doesn't mean it has no value for us.

What we have in Revelation is the composition of an author and artist who exercised his own literary and theological creativity

to communicate in a compelling way the meaning of life and the world

in light of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, as given to him in this vision he had while living on Patmos.

The question to be answered is not if, when or how the world will end,

but what is the meaning of our suffering and “Will God be faithful?”

And you know that he is.

Our passage today shows that.

Here are gathered the multitude of people from every nation, all tribes and languages, standing before the throne with palm branches in their hands;

“Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne and to the Lamb.”

They are victors, even if martyred on earth, victors in heaven dressed in white.

But it is not their own courage that has made them victors but the death of Christ himself.

Their death becomes one with the Lamb's death.

What we celebrate on All Saints Day, what we remember today is that victory over death,

the victory into which our loved ones have been gathered before the throne of God.

The victory into which we will be gathered and find ourselves before the throne of God with all those we have loved.

Today as you remember your loved ones who have died you remember how they helped make you into who you are today,

how they influenced your spiritual formation and growth.

You remember the love and the joys you shared, and the sorrow you experienced, or are still experiencing, since their passing;

the empty place in your life that is not yet filled, the wound not yet healed.

So this day may be a little bit about grieving and healing.

From a passage in *The Presence* by Berthold Von Schenk we hear a word of healing in the beautiful image of the lasting relationship he has with his departed wife. In that he said:

We must come to a sense of the continuing presence of our loved ones, and we can do this if we realize the presence of our Living Lord. As we seek and find our Risen Lord we shall find our dear departed. They are with Him... We worship with them. They worship the Risen Christ face to face, while we worship

the same Risen Christ under the veil of bread and wine at the altar...Here at the altar...we find our communion with the dead; for the altar is the closest meeting place between us and our Lord...The altar is the trysting place where we meet our beloved Lord. It must, therefore, also be the trysting place where we meet our loved ones, for they are with the Lord.

He spent time at the altar with his departed wife worshiping the Lord together.

You gather here on this All Saints Day and write the names of your departed loved ones in the Book of Names here on the table to honor them.

We have given thanks and affirmed our baptism into the death and resurrection of our Lord Christ.

You will gather around the altar, the closest thing we have to the throne of God,

and while you are there you may think about the closeness of your departed loved ones as they are gathered around the throne of God singing:

Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb.

This is not just about individual remembrances though. This day, All Saints Day is about the community of faith; Communion of Saints both living and dead.

This is about the connection among all believers throughout all the ages of the past, the present and the future.

This is not only a day of remembering but also one of reminding.

We are reminded that we are here and have what we have, in large part,

because of the saints before us who lived lives of faith and who understood that a life of discipleship was a life of giving their best

to make sure that those who came after them would have a church and community of faith to be a part of,
and a safe world with the resources to sustain them
and all who come after them.

We are reminded that we are called to carry on their legacy with our own.

We are reminded of the devotion and discipline needed in living a loving relationship with God and others.

That means gathering around this altar regularly, hearing His word often, giving generously, serving faithfully.

We are reminded of the promise of eternal life granted through the suffering, death and resurrection of our Lord, Jesus Christ;

“...the Lamb who was slain, whose blood set us free to be people of God.”