

Immanuel (Augsburg) Lutheran Church
Shobonier, Illinois
All Saint' Day (observed)
November 3, 2024
Revelation 7:9-17

The Host Arrayed in White

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, and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" (Revelation 7:9-10 ESV)

Dearly Beloved,

All Saints' Day is a celebration of the Church, and has been since at least the 7th century. It is a day to remember that the Church is made up of saints, both living and departed. We who feebly struggle through this life engaged in the fight of faith are in the Church Militant. But we are not alone. For there are also saints who have fought the good fight, who have kept the faith, who have finished the course and now rest from their labors. They are the saints in the Church Triumphant. Yet, there are not two churches, but one Church, the very Bride of Christ.

In our Baptism, we were enlisted in the Church Militant. We live by faith, not by sight, as we march ever onward toward the goal for which God has called us in Christ Jesus. We are engaged in a fight to the death to overcome all that would keep us from Christ and the place He has prepared for us. We are living in the days of the great tribulation and are called to fight the good fight of faith. And what a fight it is! For we are attacked on all sides by those who would defeat us and drag us down to hell - the devil, the world, and even our own sinful flesh. The devil does not want the message of forgiveness and salvation in Christ proclaimed, and the world does not want to hear it. So, as Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount, we will be persecuted and men will say all sorts of evil, speaking falsely against us (Matt. 5:11). Elsewhere, He says of the disciples and the Church collectively, "You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. And you will be hated by all for My name's sake." (Luke 21:16-17). Yes, my friends, this is life in the Church Militant. And as we fight, wearing the full armor of God, we do so with everything we've got. And though this struggle and distress will continue until we die or our Lord Jesus returns in glory, we are exhorted and encouraged to be exceedingly glad, for great is our reward in heaven (Matt. 5:12).

Yet, as the Church Militant looks forward to that which is to come, we never want to lose sight of what we have in Christ Jesus even today. For even now, though we are often at

war, we have the forgiveness of our sins in Christ – total, complete, absolute forgiveness – for He has won that forgiveness for us by His sacrificial death on the cross. Even now, we are in the very presence of Christ, for the same Christ who stretched out His arms on the cross, even now is present with us, in Word and in sacrament, waging war with the spiritual forces of darkness, winning battles, crowning us victors over all of our foes. Indeed, "when the strife is fierce, the warfare long, / Steals on the ear the distant triumph song. / And hearts are brave again and arms are strong. . ." because the Lord of the Church is present as the Valiant One whom God Himself elected.

Yet, as "we feebly struggle," there are those "who in glory shine." They are those who have been transferred from the Church Militant to the Church Triumphant. They are our dear loved ones who have already departed this life trusting only in Christ. For them, the battle is over. For them, there is peace and a rest which our hearts can hardly imagine, and our troubled and oftentimes wearied souls can hardly take in.

They are among the saints whom John saw in the heavenly vision God so graciously revealed to him. Though he was present at the Transfiguration of our Lord, what John saw in his vision was every bit as spectacular. He saw the myriad of saints who had gone before - people from every nation, tribe, people, and language - with resurrected bodies, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands.

The Church Triumphant is the Church at rest, for the dead in Christ, my friends, are eternal victors. From ancient days, palm branches have been considered a symbol of victory. That's why the pilgrims waved palm branches as Christ, the King, rode into Jerusalem. That's also why, in the history and custom of the Church, the dead in Christ were often buried with a palm branch clutched in their hand. The victory over sin, death, and the devil given to them in this life as a gift emanating from the cross of Jesus Christ, they now know in all of its fullness. For that which they received by faith in this life, they now see face to face, as St. Paul writes, "now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known." (1 Cor. 13:12).

Having come out of the great tribulation of this world, the dead in Christ are now eternally robed in the perfection and in the holiness of Him who purchased them and won them by His holy, innocent, bitter suffering, and death. Even as you and I are clothed today in the white robe of Christ's righteousness which we received in Baptism, so they are clothed and confirmed in that perfection. For them there is no more temptation, no more warfare, no more strife and hardship because for them there is no more sin, as St. John says elsewhere, for then "God will have made all things new." (Rev. 21:5).

They will never hunger nor thirst again either, for these too are the effects of sin. Jesus said, "blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled." Throughout this barren land in which we traverse to the final glory of heaven, you and I have hungered and we have thirsted for that which only Christ could give. We have come before this altar to be filled with Christ and to having the living waters of salvation flow over us. We have turned to God's Word where we sought refuge and where we looked for strength and even for solace.

But those of the Church Triumphant hunger and thirst no more, for the Lamb in the center of the throne is the Lamb who was slain and who is alive forevermore, and He is their shepherd. He fulfilled for them the words of the 23rd Psalm, for "though they walked through the valley of the shadow of death, they feared no evil . . . [He] has made them to lie down in green pastures; He has led them beside the still waters and He has restored their soul . . . goodness and mercy followed them all the days of their lives . . . and they dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

The Church at war and the Church at rest - one day, my friends, by the grace of God, we will be transferred from the former to the latter. And in that day, we will be part of all that the apostle John saw concerning the glory of heaven. It will be our new reality. It may be today, it may be tomorrow, it may be at the end of a lifetime. But in the meantime we fight, not as those who must win the war by ourselves, but as those who are good soldiers of the cross, marching behind the Valiant One, who carries, not a staff but a cross, and who is marked by the very wounds that have saved us and shielded us in the war.

God grant that we all remain faithful in the fight and thus receive the crown of life and join that countless host and "all the angels [who] stood around the throne and the elders and the four living creatures, [who] fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying, Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might, be to our God forever and ever. Amen."

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

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