

Who Are These?

Revelation 7:9-17

Trinity Lutheran Church

November 1, 2009 – Festival of All Saints



In the name of the Father, and of the † Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Dear friends in Christ, recognizing that you are a child of God by virtue of the life and merit of God's Son – and realizing that God has promised to guard and protect those who are His own – have you ever asked: “Why me?” when something bad happens in your life? The truth is that even though you know in your heart of hearts that these promises of God won't fully come to fruition until our Lord Christ returns on the Last Day, there's still a very strong tendency on the part of the old man of sin who lives inside us all to try and convince you otherwise. It's for this very reason that God inspired St. John to write down the words of his Revelation – for even though you and I *are* the beloved children of God, there's still every likelihood that we may well have to suffer many of the tragedies common to all men – because none of us are immune from the effects of the fall. There will still be times when we get sick and have to bear the burden of illness just like everyone else. We must all grow old and experience the problems old age brings. And one day, just like all the children of Adam and Eve, we too will have to die.

Consider John's words in Revelation 6 – which immediately precede this morning's reading. In the Last Days – the days in which we're now living – John saw conquering hordes heaping death and destruction on all who were weak and unable to defend themselves. He saw people killing one another over greed and selfishness – hunger and starvation running rampant all over the globe – plagues and famines striking down people with no regard to their standing – Christians martyred and persecuted for their testimony of the Truth – and the saints in heaven crying out to God: “How long, O Lord, how long will this go on?”

It all sounds pretty hopeless. Actually, it sounds an awful lot like what we see all around us in our own age. Hardly a day goes by where we aren't inundated with this kind of bad news – to the point that sometimes we may even wonder out loud if there's even any good news left to report. And yet the point of St.

John's Revelation – in spite of what many might say to the contrary – isn't that we're to focus on all this death and destruction only as a sign of God's judgment – because, after all, God's ultimate judgment happened when Christ died on Calvary – rather it's that things really aren't quite as hopeless as they seem for the children of God! This text is a perfect example. Here God gave John the privilege of seeing something else – a great and glorious multitude – a sea of people whose numbers were so large no one could ever hope to count them all – standing before the throne of God in heaven and singing praises to the Lamb.

But who are these people? St. John tells us that these are the ones who, in this life, shared in the sufferings of Christ – people who, like Christ, died in this world, apparently forsaken by God and delivered into the hands of death. And when I say “apparently forsaken by God” I mean only in a worldly sense. That's what I was just talking earlier when I pointed out the fact that we are so often wont to wonder why it is that Christians have to endure the same problems as everyone else – so that even in death it would appear as if God has left us to fend for ourselves – and that He has cursed us by returning our bodies to the dust of the ground from which we first came. John also reports that these are the ones who came out of the great tribulation – the ones who endured the rigors of this life and died – having committed themselves into God's hand – who now appear in glory before His throne.

John tells us these people weren't there because they deserved it – or by virtue of their own good works – or because they had lived lives of selfless service. They were there rather because their robes had been washed in the blood of the Lamb! Who would ever think they could fill a washing machine with blood and expect their clothes to come out white? And yet this is exactly what the Scriptures say happens to those whose robes are washed in the blood of our Savior, Jesus Christ. Of course the robes of which John speaks aren't worldly clothing such as you and I are familiar with. Rather they represent the

righteousness and holiness God requires of those who hope to stand in His presence – the kind of righteousness and holiness that can only be yours by virtue of Christ’s lifeblood shed on the cross.

This is bloody imagery – disturbing to our modern “sensibilities.” Yet, it reminds us – living as we do in the midst of the tribulation John saw in his Revelation – of how God comes to us with His Gifts to cleanse, purify, and “wash our robes” squeaky clean in the blood of His Son shed for sinners. This is precisely what happens each time you partake of the Divine Mystery of His Supper – where you receive in your own body the very body and blood of Him who sits on the throne in heaven and rules over all things. Perhaps in your travels you’ve seen Altar Paraments, stained-glass windows or some other Church art showing a Lamb standing on a book with seven seals, holding a banner and a cross. In His side is a deep wound from which a stream of blood flows into a Chalice nestled beside Him. That imagery comes from this section of Revelation. The Lamb is Christ. His blood is what fills that chalice. And when in faith you drink from it, you’re washed in that blood and cleansed of your sins, even as Jesus promised.

As this great multitude of saints stands before the throne of God, it also calls to mind the fact that, in Christ, God’s people are called out from this world and their bondage to sin, pain, suffering and death – and that with the people of God from every age, they also participate in a new and better Exodus – an Exodus from earth to heaven. And it’s for the sake of this great gift of salvation that they sing their Hosannas to God for all He has wrought – even as the angels echo their praises, and give glory to God for His unspeakable mercy. The salvation of God’s saints is accomplished in spite of their wretched appearance in life – in spite of the fact that they may have been poor and despised, or suffered many things for their Lord. But now they stand proud and courageous before God’s Presence because they know their strength belongs to God alone – and to the Lamb who sits upon the throne.

Indeed, the Lamb is now their Shepherd in the truest sense of the Word. Though in this world Christ once led the children of Israel through the wilderness into the Promised Land of Cana, that was only a dim shadow of that Promised Land in which they now stand. Though in this world the saints often celebrate

the gifts of God through their many ceremonies and acts of worship, yet even these are nothing more than a shadowy glimpse of how grand and glorious the worship of God will be in heaven. Though you and I have been privileged to share in the many blessings God bestows upon us through our participation in His body and blood in the Sacrament of the Altar, even that is only a foretaste of the fullness of the feast that awaits us when we go to dwell with God in His kingdom – and to eat at His heavenly banquet table.

There in heaven – John tells us – it is Christ alone, slain for our sins – who will supply our every need. He is the Good Shepherd who will lead us to the lush, fragrant pastures of His Father’s heaven, and there satisfy our thirst with never-ending streams of living water that flow like a great flood from God’s hand to comfort us. There we’ll experience the satisfaction of our deepest Godly desires, as God Himself fulfills our very reason for being. And there we’ll serve for all eternity before His heavenly throne, worshipping Him without ceasing amidst choirs of angels, archangels, and all the host of heaven.

Is life treating you fairly? Are you getting everything you think you deserve – or, putting it negatively, more than you think you deserve? Do you think God is withholding a blessing from you because of something you’ve done – or failed to do? Then listen to these words of encouragement, dear children of God. Since we have so great a promise, let us not lose heart. Though we often suffer much, the truth is that not even a lifetime of pain and suffering is worth comparing with the endless glory awaiting us in heaven. Commit yourself therefore into the hands of Christ, our Good Shepherd. Draw strength not from yourself, but from Him who is all Strength. Look into His eyes with the eyes of faith, listen to His Word, and believe His promises. And in Him, look forward to that day when, by His grace, He will draw you to Himself in heaven, where you will also be part of that great throng before the throne which no one can number – where endless Hosannas ascend before God’s throne without ceasing – and where joy will have no end. God *will* grant it to you for Jesus’ sake. Amen.

And now that peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in that one true faith in Christ Jesus, unto life everlasting. Amen.