

6 November 2016
The Feast of All Saints

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Living in a World of Death”

Text: Revelation 7:9-17; 1 John 3:1-3; Matthew 5:1-12

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

On All Saints Day, many churches will remember their members who died this year. They will read their names, perhaps toll a bell, and give thanks for their lives and the blessing they were. We have never done that here, because many years, like this year, we have no one to remember. None of our members died this year. That is partly because we are a smaller congregation and do not have a great number of elderly members, and those we do have are remarkably healthy. But it's not just older people who die - younger folks do too, even children. Some from military sacrifice, others from disease, and some because of accident. But we have been spared this sorrow too.

But that doesn't mean you don't know the sorrow of death. You do, and have felt its icy, horrid grip again this year. You have family members, friends, and neighbors who have died or are in danger of death. We see death on our TVs from war, violence, and terrorism, as well as the continued intentional killing of babies in the womb, the elderly at the end of life, and of those suffering or disabled. We see it in nature, the changing seasons reminding us that creation, too, is dying. All around us we see sin collecting its terrible wages. The sorrow of life ended.

But there is one who does not sorrow, but rejoices over all this: the father of death called satan. He loves death for he hates God. And as life is the gift of God, so he desires to take that gift away. So he makes death look good, to deceive people into suicide, mislead them into abortion, seduce them into mercy killing, and to think things are better this way. And sadly, we see him succeeding. And not just in others. If you've ever rejoiced in the death of another, then he has succeeded in you, too. If we rejoice that the terrorist, or criminal, or speeder recklessly going 100 mph on the Beltway, or that bully, or that stupid politician that never voted the right way, or . . . who else? If we rejoice in their death, that they got what they deserved, is it not our hearts that have been hardened? For is that not a life Jesus died to save? And do we not deserve the same?

So satan hates today. Because today we trumpet his defeat. Today, All Saints Day, trumpets our hope in the midst of a world of death. *For who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come? These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation.* These are the ones who have died, but through death have escaped death and

now live beyond the reach of death. Because of the One who entered death and defeated it for us. The One who allowed Himself to be devoured by death, in order to devour it in His resurrection. The One who creates life, gives life, and would not stand idly by when that gift was taken away, but came to restore life. That His resurrection, Jesus' resurrection, be but the first of many, many more. That we rejoice not in death, but in the life *after* death, the life beyond the reach of death, provided for us and given to us by Jesus.

And we hear that today. In John's great vision of heaven he saw ***a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages.*** All who were washed in the blood of the Lamb of God. For life is in the blood (Deuteronomy 12:23). *His* blood. And so all who are washed in His blood have the life that conquers death and that death cannot end. And so we have hope in Jesus. There is hope for us who are **living in the midst of death.**

Hope, for John's vision is of heaven, not of earth. For as the same John also wrote in his epistle that we heard today: ***what we will be has not yet appeared.*** In fact, I think, John could have been a bit stronger in what he wrote. For judging by appearance there is no difference at all. We look like everyone else, get sick like everyone else, have problems like everyone else, and die like everyone else. . . . And yet **there is a hidden reality here.** There are conquerors among us. Secret agents, if you will. Those whose bodies are dying yet filled with life. Children of earthly parents yet ***children of God***, John says. *That's who we are.* That's what your Baptism has done. Washed you in the blood of the Lamb, made you a child of God, and given you a sure and certain hope. That though we are here poor in spirit, mourning, meek, hungry and thirsting, reviled and persecuted, there is a kingdom waiting for us. Or as John's fellow apostle Paul would put it: *I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us* (Romans 8:18).

So when John saw that great multitude, when he saw all the saints, He saw you. Future you. And this too: *he saw the Beatitudes fulfilled.*

He saw the poor in spirit, poor no more, but given the kingdom of heaven.

He saw God wiping away every tear from the eyes of those who mourn.

He saw the meek who inherited not this sinful, old, dying earth, but *the new heavens and the new earth.*

He saw those who hungered and thirsted for righteousness hungering and thirsting no more.

He saw the merciful mercied, the pure in heart before the throne of God, and the

peacemakers with their Father.

He saw those coming out of the great tribulation, those persecuted for righteousness' sake, safe and sheltered by the Lamb in His kingdom, now their kingdom, too.

Yes, despised and scorned they sojourned here, but now how glorious they appear. O blessed saints in bright array, Now safely home in endless day (LSB #676 v. 2-3).

Because of Jesus, death no longer has the final word. Those who speak no more *here* are speaking, praising the God they once confessed by faith, now by sight. The God they were once reviled and persecuted for, but who fulfilled His promise to them, of a great reward in heaven. They really were blessed all along. Blessing here and now hidden, but there revealed.

And so are you. Blessed. Here and now. Though now it may not seem so. Though it seem like the church and the truth are losing. Though it seem like there are more tears than joys, more struggles than triumphs, more persecution than reward. Yet all these promises of God are already being fulfilled in you and for you. For you are mercied, comforted, fed, sons of God, and yes, the kingdom of God is already yours.

Which is good and important to remember especially two days before our national elections. That you are citizens of heaven. That the kingdom is already yours. That you don't have to build or maintain kingdoms here and the future does not depend on what we do. ***Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might*** belong to God and the Lamb, no matter what those running for office may tell you. And no matter what happens on Tuesday, *that won't change*. No matter what persecution comes, *that won't change*. No matter what challenges the future brings, what attacks evil brings, what immorality erodes, *that won't change*. You belong to God. You are blessed. You are children of God. John's vision is the reality that has already begun, and will one day be finished.

So yes, blessed are you. A blessing that not even ***reviling and persecution and all kinds of evil uttered against you*** can change or take away. ***For your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*** And look at them now! Where are their revilers, persecutors, and slanderers? But the prophets and those who went before us, we know where they are. John saw them. Cared for. At home forever.

And they are waiting for you to join them. For as Jesus came and spoke to us of blessing, so He will take us to that blessing in all its fullness, that we may speak together with all the saints around the throne of God.

They will come and join us today, in fact, and help our praise. For here, as Jesus feeds with His Body and Blood those hungering and thirsting for righteousness, the angels and

archangels and all the company of heaven are here, too. Every time we gather around this altar to receive Jesus, John's vision is fulfilled. We just can't see it yet. But we will. And what a glorious, joyful day that will be.

I don't know if Tuesday will be glorious and joyful. Well, I know that for half the country it won't be. But already having a king and a kingdom, and a future that is secure, we don't vote to benefit ourselves - we vote in love for our neighbor, to benefit them. They need it. We vote to give, not to receive. And that is more blessed (Acts 20:35).

Things may very well get worse before they get better. In fact, the Scriptures say to count on that. So we will, as they say, bake that into our expectation of the future. And know that whatever tribulation we may be in, now or in the future, we will come out of. It will not, can not, defeat you. For your white robe has already been given to you at the Font, your food and drink at the Altar, and Your Shepherd is already here and now giving you the quiet and peaceful waters of His Word to drink deeply.

For the book of Revelation - think of it this way - it is like John's *Wikileaks* of how things look from heaven's perspective. That we may see it too, what is hidden now. God Himself has leaked it out for you. To undermine our confidence in ourselves and our world, that we put our faith and hope where it belongs: in Him alone. And for all who do, this is your day. For all who so are saints.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.