

4 November 2018
The Feast of All Saints

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“The Big Picture”

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

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

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 . . .

I remember a few years ago on All Saints Day reflecting on those words, and trying to imagine who John saw in that heavenly crowd. And since John was in exile on the Isle of Patmos, late in life, when he had this vision (Revelation 1:9-11), I imagined that among the people he saw in this vision were his friends; his fellow apostles, who had been martyred. Most gruesomely. Peter. His brother James. Matthew. Andrew. Philip. Steven, the very first Christian martyr. And Paul. How comforting this vision, then, to him. To see his friends now safe. To see their suffering turned into joy. To see Jesus, the Lamb upon His throne, with His own gathered around Him. All His promises made, fulfilled.

And so for us, too. Who, for us, is in that crowd that John saw?

A woman whose mind was taken by Alzheimers.

An old pastor whose body finally wore out.

A baby who died before she was able to be born.

A woman overcome by cancer.

A old man who lived a long life.

A young woman who had been gunned down by a mentally ill person bent on revenge.

A family killed by a drunk driver.

A father who struggled to make ends meet.

A wife who did her best, but her best was never good enough.

A college student who drank too much one night and fell out a 13th story window.

A poor widow.

A man who lived under a bridge.

A soldier who lost his legs when he was blown up by an IED.

An old childless couple.

A prisoner who just had some mixture of chemicals injected into his veins.

And who else?

Who might you see or imagine in that great multitude?

These are *the ones coming out of the great tribulation*. Tribulation, not ease. For life in this world is seldom easy. There is hunger and thirst and tears. There is trouble, trials, and temptations. There is weakness, fear, and death. And we are a little flock, hunted by the devil, hounded by his demons, and harassed by his evil, both without and within. And we often fail. We often fall. We are often overcome. And we look at our lives, and we look at life in this world, and we don't see blessed. We see trouble, difficulty, and sin.

And yet in the midst of such a world, we have hope. And we are given this vision of hope today. That there is more than what we can see. Much more. And that as John said today in his epistle, though *we are God's children now, what we will be has not yet appeared*. Who we are and what we will be is hidden now in this world of sin. But the day is coming when all will be revealed. When Jesus comes again, and John's vision becomes reality. All God's promises, fulfilled.

So saints don't often look like saints on earth. The blessed don't often look blessed. In fact, they may look exactly the opposite. Martyrs don't look blessed. Those who are suffering don't look blessed. Those who mourn or who are meek don't look blessed. Those who are poor in spirit and who hunger and thirst for righteousness don't look blessed. Those who are merciful are often taken advantage of. The peacemakers, too. The pure in heart are mocked, and those who dare to speak of a righteousness different than the world's, they can expect persecution. Lawsuits, loss of job, loss of friends, loss of support, loss of reputation. It all happened to Jesus. And it will happen to those who are His.

And yet *blessed*, He says. Over and over He says it. These are they who are blessed!

That sounds foolish to many. That's not blessed! At least, not the blessed I want! Blessed is to win the \$1.6 billion dollars in the lottery. Blessed is to be happy and have all you want. Blessed is to not suffer. Blessed is to be full and satisfied. Blessed is to have an easy life, to be well-liked, *to have all your dreams come true*.

Well, perhaps that last one is the key. *For what are your dreams?* Are they only for this world and life? Are they that small? . . . Maybe it's time to think bigger. Maybe it's time to realize that maybe we don't know what blessed is, and need to be taught. Like Jesus did today. These are the blessed ones. Not the ones who seem blessed here and now, for a short time in this short life. But the ones John saw. The ones with tribulation now but blessed forever.

Hebrews chapter 11 is sometimes called the great faith chapter. It speaks of a great multitude of Old Testament saints who were waiting for the promise of God to be fulfilled - the promise of a Saviour. John must have seen them, too, in His vision. Abel, Enoch, and Noah; Abraham and Sarah; Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph; Moses and the Israelites

who crossed the Red Sea with him; Rahab, the prostitute; Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah; David and Samuel and the prophets. And then are mentioned many without names: those who were tortured, those who suffered mocking and flogging, chains and imprisonment. Those who were stoned, sawn in two, and killed with the sword. And more. And we wonder: *how could they do what they did? How could they stand firm?* And the answer is that **they dreamed bigger**. They didn't dream small, of just things in this small world and short life. They knew, as we read in that Hebrews chapter, that they *were strangers and exiles on earth, and seeking a homeland, a better country, a heavenly one. The one God had prepared for them.*

And as John's vision shows us today, their dreams - I mean, their faith - came true.

And so All Saints Day reminds us of this truth: that the purpose of the church, the purpose of our faith, the purpose of Jesus, is **not that we live a blessed life, but that we die a blessed death**. For that is far better.

A blessed death. Sounds strange, doesn't it? For death is the result of sin and the curse of sin. Death was never meant to be. Death is strange and alien to who God created us to be. And death never looks blessed. It's ugly and empty, even when it ends suffering and pain. But if the suffering and pain ends in this life only to continue in the next, that is not a blessed death, but a pitiable one. For in that suffering and pain there is no hope that it will end.

A blessed death, though, is possible. John's vision and the saints who have gone before us testify to that. And it is one of the elders, standing around the throne in heaven with all the saints and talking to John, who tells us how. ***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.***

It is the blood of the Lamb, the blood of Jesus, that enables us to die a blessed death. Ironically, it is the blood of the Lamb, the blood of Jesus, that causes us tribulation in this life. That puts the satanic bulls-eye on your back. That makes this life seem, at times, anything but blessed.

But ***blessed*** are you, Jesus says. Over and over He says it! Even if you don't look like it. Even if you don't feel like it. For Jesus took your cursed for you. He died the cursed death (Deuteronomy 21:23) and then rose from that cursed death, so that you could die a blessed death and rise to blessed life. With Him. For to be ***washed in the blood of the Lamb*** means to be washed by the blood that flowed out from Him on the cursed cross. The blood of forgiveness. The blood that contains His life.

And you have been so washed, when that blood was poured on you in your baptism. And you continue to be washed as that blood washes over you with His absolution and in the

words of His Gospel. And He gives you His life as you eat His Body and drink His Blood. And you are blessed. Here and now and for forever. And you lead a blessed life and you die a blessed death. For you are in Jesus. And in Jesus, all that's His is yours. Even if it is hidden under suffering, tribulation, and death in this world and life now.

But that doesn't make it not real. For hidden doesn't mean not real - in fact, just the opposite. Hidden means it is here and real; you just can't see it. But John saw it. And we believe it. I mean, *see it . . .* by faith.

So today, All Saints Day, the saints are encouraging us. To not give up. To keep the faith. To remember to think and dream big.

On this All Saints day we also remember that we are not alone. That you can never be alone at church. For where Jesus is, His angels and saints are. And Jesus is here. So here, we join them and they join us, around the Lamb. They are just hidden. You know, some older Christians can tell us stories of the good ol' days, when churches were filled, Sunday School classes booming, and confirmation classes large. John's vision shows us that the good ol' days still are.

And All Saints Day teaches us what really is. That what is called death on earth is called the final deliverance in heaven. That blessed is what God calls blessed, not what we think is. And that the day is coming when all this will be seen. When we will see Jesus. Who, by the way, did not look blessed either. Born with animals and laid in their feed trough. Forced to flee a king who wanted to kill Him. Growing up in poverty. Opposed every step of the way. Arrested as a criminal. Mocked, beaten, whipped, crucified. But blessed was hidden in this man. And blessed is hidden in you, for Christ is in you. And ***when He appears***, John says, ***we will be like Him***. That is, we will see what has been hidden all along.

And the Feast that we began to sing of here again today, the Feast that we get a foretaste of here, will be our Feast forever. As John saw, and said: no more hunger, no more thirst, no more tears, no more scorching heat of tribulations. Only joy. Yes, *this is the Feast of Victory for our God!* His victory for all the saints. For you and me. *Alleluia!*

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.