

2 November 2003
The Festival of All Saints

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Two Pictures, One Faith”

Text: Revelation 7:2-17; Matthew 5:1-12

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

No small amount of mischief has been done in the Church across the centuries by those who have misinterpreted the Book of Revelation. Mischief that has produced fear and doubt in the minds of many, causing many to question their faith, to question the faithfulness of God, and to question whether or not they will even be saved. The Apostle John would be, as they say, “*turning over in his grave,*” if he knew what was being said in his name these days. Because Revelation was written not to produce fear and doubt, but was written for our encouragement and our comfort – especially the verses that were read this evening, the assigned reading for this All Saints’ Day. For in these verses, John has laid out for us **a true picture of all the saints:** the first half of this reading describing the saints on earth, the children of God in the Church Militant; and the second half of this reading describing the saints in heaven, the children of God in the Church Triumphant. And both pictures are encouraging, as they show us that God is faithful, and will not let us down. And that’s important, because on this All Saints’ Day, it is important to know that God is not just concerned about all the saints, the big picture – but that He is concerned about each and every saint, including you. You who are saints, holy people, not by word or deed, but by grace through faith in the One who makes you holy, the Lamb of God, your Saviour Jesus Christ.

And so first, John presents a picture of the saints on earth, the Church Militant. “*Then I saw another angel ascending from the rising of the sun, with the seal of the living God, and he called with a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to harm earth and sea, saying, ‘Do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees, until we have sealed the servants of our God on their foreheads.’*” And the first thing to notice here is not the angels, and not the winds, and not the power to harm the earth and sea, and not all the terrible and frightening pictures many usually associate with Revelation . . . but that before any of this can happen, *God seals and protects His children.* **Yes**, in your life there’s going to be hardship, and persecution, and suffering, and tribulation. **Yes**, you are going to be tested in your faith and witness. **Yes**, in this world, you are going to face opposition and evil. *But in the midst of it all, you will be protected.* Protected in your

faith by what is called “*the seal of the living God,*” which not a physical mark, but which is a way of speaking about the Holy Spirit. For throughout the Scriptures the Holy Spirit is called God’s seal and the promise of your adoption as a child of God. And this sealing is not something that only happens once and then you’re good as long as you don’t lose it! No, it is an ongoing event. **Ongoing**, as the Holy Spirit continues to come to you as you hear the Word of God and receive His Sacraments. **Ongoing**, as the Holy Spirit continues to come to you and protect you, and strengthen your faith, and point your eyes to Christ. **Ongoing**, because the danger is ongoing. Because the Church on earth is not called the Church *Militant* for nothing! Because there are times when things can look pretty bleak, and when it seems as if the darkness is winning. When sin and jealousy and evil and hatred and anger and bitterness and lust are not just raging up all around us, but even from within us – from our still sinful and stony hearts. For there is no rest for the one who wants to take you away from God and consume you for his own pleasure and satisfaction, and so attacks you both from without and from within.

And so how good it is to know that God has not left us on our own, but has given us His Holy Spirit. That come what may, we know that we are His, and that He will see us through. Because you know that on your own, you could not possibly do it. But the Spirit of God, given through Christ who defeated the evil one on the cross, can do it; and is doing it, for you.

And who this Church Militant is, who these are who have been sealed by God, John next goes onto describe: 144,000, or 12,000 from “*every tribe of the sons of Israel.*” And there are a number of things to notice about these verses. First, that number is not a literal number, but is a number representing *completeness*. It represents the exact, right, and complete number of those who belong to God in the Church on earth, the Church Militant. We do not have to worry about whether we are among the few, true believers, as some would have you worry about. No, it is a symbolical number and not a literal number, and it is because **it is a number that is constantly changing**. The number of saints, the number of the children of God on earth, the size of the Church Militant, is always changing. God is bringing people into His Church through the preaching of the Gospel, and He is moving people from this world into the next. At some points in time the Church is larger and at some points it is smaller. But it is always exact, and right, and complete. God knows who belongs to Him, and He keeps them in His care. And so sometimes the faithful may be a vast army, like the greatness of the kingdom of Israel in King David’s time, or it may be like the 7,000 that did not bend their knees to Baal at the time of Elijah, or it may grow by 3,000 like it did on the day of Pentecost, or it may be like the 300 that God chose to use in Gideon’s time. But God’s Church is always exact, and right, and complete. Even though we may not always think so, and see the weakness and the schisms and tribulation and persecution of the Church and of Christians. But in

God's eyes, it is always perfect and complete, and exactly according to His plan.

Notice also that God goes to great care to list the twelve tribes. That seems like a detail that we could have done without, or could have simply skipped over those *rather redundant* verses to make the reading and the service a little shorter! But did you ever wonder, why did God list them like that? Well, for several reasons I think. **First** to impress upon us the exactness and preciseness of it all – that God knows what He's doing, down to the very smallest detail. . . . **But also** it takes our minds back to the time of the Exodus, when the 12 tribes of Israel camped around the Tabernacle of God, as God led them through the wilderness. They were really the Church Militant then too, for they were getting ready for the conquest of the Promised Land! But even then we know it was not really the 12 tribes that conquered the Land, but God who fought for them, just as it is also now not our doing that saves us, but our God who fights for us. . . . **But thirdly**, and perhaps most importantly, John is teaching us something about the Church, the new Israel of God. For if you listened carefully, you will have noticed that the 12 tribes listed here are not exactly the same as the 12 tribes of the Old Testament. The tribes of Dan and Ephraim, which led the apostasy and idolatry of Israel, are gone – replaced with Levi and Joseph. And so while the new Israel, the New Testament Church, is a continuation of the Old Testament Church, it is also different. For we are children of Abraham by faith, not by physical descent. And those who belong to this number do not include the idolatrous, but those who by faith belong to Christ.

That is the first half of the picture given to us by John: the Church Militant, the Church of God's saints, on earth. The Church persecuted and attacked. The Church in struggle. **But also the Church of promise and hope.** And so we should not expect everything to go smoothly and well for us. We should not expect worldly triumph and success. But we know that we are sealed and protected, and therefore we know that the Church will not fall or fail. We need only remain faithful, for it is God who fights for us, and is leading us to the Promised Land.

And it is that picture, of the Promised Land of Heaven and of the Church Triumphant, that John then goes on to describe in the second half of this reading. For we heard, ***"After this I looked, and behold . . ."*** what a change! No longer is the Church a chosen few, but now ***"a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages."*** And no longer is there battle and strife, but now palm branches waved in triumph, and angels, martyrs, and all the faithful, gathered around the throne of God and the Lamb of God. There is peace and rest. For the One who is both the Lamb and the Shepherd, the Son of God, has led His flock home. John sees that the Son of God who came down from heaven, and became the man Jesus, and who as both God and man died on the cross for our sins, has won the victory against sin,

death, and the devil, and has led His flock of all times and all places, home. And not one has been lost.

And the scene seems to surprise John! For one moment he is looking at the Church Militant, suffering and struggling in this world, beaten, bruised, and battered, a seeming minority battling against sin and evil . . . and then in the next moment he sees this great multitude, all in white, and in triumph, and he seems to say to himself, *“Who are these?”* The two scenes don’t seem to go together! . . . But oh, they do go together! For they are exactly the same people in both scenes!

And here is where the Holy Gospel that we heard from St. Matthew can help us understand. For from Mathew we heard once again the Beatitudes, which to many people, quite frankly, don’t make a whole lot of sense! For *how* can we be blessed in those ways? How can we be blessed as we are poor in spirit, as we mourn and cry, as we are trampled on, as we hunger and thirst for righteousness in a world filled with sin, as we live in the midst of turmoil, as we are persecuted. This is blessedness? . . . Well, it is! Only in this life, in this world, it is blessedness hidden. Hidden under the struggles and strains of this world. Hidden to physical eyes, but revealed by faith. But in the midst of the struggle, in this Church Militant, remember that you are sealed, that God has given you His Holy Spirit, and that you are His. And so even though His blessing may be hidden from your eyes now, as we fight and struggle in this life, it will one day be revealed to us, just as it was to John. For the time is coming when all the struggles of the Beatitudes will be reversed, but the blessing will remain. The tears will be wiped away, the hunger and thirst gone, the scorching heat of persecution a distant memory . . . but the blessing of God will be the same. The presence of God will be the same. The worship here begun in time, will there continue for eternity.

“Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come? . . . These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation.” Coming out of the Church Militant. *“They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.”* Who are these? They are people like you and me. We are the ones coming. **Coming**, even now. **Coming** in a continuous stream, from the beginning of time to the end of time. **Coming** to Christ in repentance and receiving forgiveness. **Coming** in faith by the Holy Spirit. **Coming** to the baptismal font to be washed in the water and the Word. **Coming** to the Lord’s Table to eat and drink the true body and blood of Jesus. **Coming** to receive the washing of Absolution. **Coming** with robes stained with sin, and washing them clean in the blood of the Lamb. **Coming** because we can do no other. **Coming** because as we sang, *“the fight is fierce, the warfare long.”* **Coming** because we cannot be forgiven enough. **Coming** because here is our strength. **Coming** . . . until the day our Father sends His angels to come to us, and bring us home. To take us to the other side of this

altar, to join once and for all “*the angels and archangels and all the company of heaven.*” To see what John saw, as we are taken from the Church Militant to the Church Triumphant. To join “*All the saints, who from their labors rest.*”

And so with these two pictures, the Apostle John has given us a wonderful picture of the Church of all the saints, and of our hope. Some of the saints have passed through this life and world and are already home; some are here now; and some are still to come. But we are all part of God’s one plan of salvation, and His one Church. And with His words to us, the Apostle John helps us to realize and understand that what we see is not all there is. That the struggle and suffering and tribulation and testing you experience now are only temporary. And that the unity of all the saints which now we know only by faith, will one day be revealed for us as it was for John. That you are included in that great multitude. And that the songs of the angels that we join in on now, though imperfectly, we will one day join in perfection. For God is faithful, and He will not let you down.

*The golden evening brightens in the west;
Soon, soon to faithful warriors comes their rest;
Sweet is the calm of paradise the blest. Alleluia! 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.