

For All the Saints

Revelation 7:9-17

November 7, 2021

When I got the call from Rev. Zanicky on Friday asking me if I could substitute for him today, I said “Yes.” That was what my mother told me her father said to reply, if someone asked her to speak. “Say ‘Yes.’” So, every time someone asks me to speak, or teach a class, or anything like that, I am reminded of those saints who have gone before us, particularly my mother and her parents. But then my mind expands to include my father, my other grandparents, aunts, uncles, teachers, friends, and many others. Today it is especially appropriate to remember the saints, little s, that have gone on before us. By their examples, they have lighted our way.

Yes, “All Saints’ Day” was this past Monday. But a week ago, we were obligated to celebrate Reformation Sunday, indeed a very significant occasion. We did sing “For All the Saints” as our closing hymn. This Sunday we may want to be thinking of our Veterans, since Armistice Day, November 11 when World War I ended, is celebrated. Now, of course, it is “Veterans’ Day.” A day on which we give thanks for those who have served their country, especially in time of war, whether overseas or on the home front. We especially remember those who gave up their lives in service to us, their fellow countrymen, and even for others, for the sake of preserving liberty and freedom. Well, that’s a little bit like giving thanks to God for all of the saints. A different context, and a different group of people. We give thanks to both for their faithfulness and service, each in their own way.

John’s letters, and the *Revelation of John*, concern the saints of his day, almost 2000 years ago. They were under persecution. The persecution was getting worse. Remember, the Church was small back then. Christians were not in any position to influence government policies. They were the oppressed. Rome, more specifically the Emperor, was in control. John wrote *The Revelation* as a message of hope to his congregations in the province of Asia. He encouraged them to take heart and be steadfast in the face of oppression, threats, and even death, for the sake of their belief in the risen Christ.

So, I am reading from *The Revelation of John*, Chapter 7, beginning with verse 9. John, in his vision, is in heaven standing before the throne of God.

⁹ After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no man could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, ¹⁰ and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits upon the throne, and to the Lamb!" ¹¹ And all the angels stood round the throne and round the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, ¹² saying, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God for ever and ever! Amen."

¹³ Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, clothed in white robes, and whence have they come?" ¹⁴ I said to him, "Sir, you know." And he said to me, "These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

**¹⁵ Therefore are they before the throne of God,
and serve him day and night within his temple;
and he who sits upon the throne will shelter them with his presence.**

**¹⁶ They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more;
the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat.**

**¹⁷ For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd,
and he will guide them to springs of living water;
and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."**

May God bless the hearing of his holy word.

The Revelation of John seems to have been written towards the end of the reign of the Roman Emperor Domitian, who reigned 81-96 A.D. Domitian followed his father Vespasian and brother Titus as emperor. Vespasian and Titus were both competent emperors. It was during their time that the first Jewish revolt was suppressed and Jerusalem destroyed in 70 A.D. Both were worshipped as gods, but certainly Vespasian didn't take that very seriously. He even joked about it when he became ill, saying (according to the Roman historian Suetonius), "I suppose," said he, "I shall soon be a god." Neither he nor his son Titus instituted persecutions of Christians or Jews for religious reasons. But, Domitian was something else.

Domitian got the title of Emperor because of being Vespasian's son. He had not done anything particularly worthy. Vespasian and Titus had won the Jewish war. They had enriched Rome with the treasures of the Jerusalem temple. Domitian had not done much of anything. The Emperorship was not supposed to be a matter of heredity. It was only the Army's loyalty to Vespasian that led to this unworthy son succeeding his brother as emperor. Domitian understood this situation. He compensated by insisting that his status as a god be carried to extremes. He commanded public sacrifices to his genius. His household was required to address him as, "our Lord and God," and "Most Sacred Emperor," and even as "Jupiter." That last even usurped the position of the greatest god of the Roman pantheon.

An extension of this self-elevation was an insistence on being worshipped by everyone in the empire. Historically, the Jews had been given a pass on that. They obstinately refused to worship anyone other than their own ethnic god. Jews were too widespread and useful to be worth persecuting and killing for not conforming. But, that status was in danger in the time of Domitian. In 95, Domitian executed his cousin, the consul Clemens, and others. He accused them of "atheism," and for adopting a "Jewish" mode of life. Domitian punished yet others, including his niece, the wife of Clemens, with exile and confiscation of property. The Jews did manage to preserve their protected status. They officially declared, at the Council of Jamnia, A.D. 90, that Christians were not Jews. From that time, Christians, by then mostly Gentiles, could not claim a right to be excused from emperor worship.

The persecution of Christians was not confined to Rome, but also occurred in the Eastern empire, the region around Asia Minor, where John was. Many were martyred. Others forsook Christianity. *The Revelation*, as well as the letters of John in the *Bible*, address this situation. Under threat of persecution and death, some Christians sought accommodation. They wanted to both fulfill the requirement to worship the emperor, and also remain members of the Christian community, the Church. John, and the Church in general, would not allow that. If you were a true worshiper of God, and Jesus, you could not also declare that the emperor was God. They had the same reason that the Jews did. Saying, "Caesar is Lord" was a violation of the First Commandment.

The book *The Revelation* is an apocalypse, a transliteration of a Greek word meaning "revelation" or "vision." The term always is used of writings concerning the "end times." There was a conception that this present "age" would ultimately

end with the Great and Terrible Day of the Lord. A new “age” would then be ushered in. God’s reign would displace all evil and wickedness. Some writings see this as all taking place on the physical earth that we know, with the current reign of evil on earth cleansed away. Other writings see the age to come as elsewhere, after the earth as we know it has been destroyed. Apocalyptic writings occur in the books of Daniel, Ezekiel, Amos, and even in some of Jesus’s words in Matthew, 24:3-44. The term is not just for Biblical texts. Other apocalypses were in circulation about the same time and earlier.

The Revelation of John begins with John’s vision of the risen Jesus. He is given messages for seven churches in the province of “Asia,” in the vicinity of Ephesus. John is then taken in spirit up to a vision of Heaven, before the throne of God, where he witnesses the heavenly worship. In Chapter 5 God holds a scroll. The question is, “Who is worthy to open the scroll and its seven seals?” Jesus, identified by John as The Lamb appearing as if it had been slain, is found worthy. That is the scene rendered in music by the great final chorus of Handel’s *Messiah*.

Then, as the seals of the scroll are broken, the Four Horsemen appear and the end of the age begins. At the fifth seal, the martyrs appear, praying for justice and vengeance. They are told to wait a little longer; there are others yet to be added to their number. At the sixth seal, there are earthquakes, the Sun becomes black, and the stars fall. The dire state of things is apparent to everyone remaining on earth. Four angels at the corners of the earth wait for the signal to unleash the winds of destruction. They are told, “Not yet.” The 144,000 “sealed” servants of God need to be numbered, 12,000 representing each of the twelve tribes of Israel. That brings us to Chapter 7, beginning with verse 9, today’s scripture.

⁹ After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no man could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, ¹⁰ and crying out with a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits upon the throne, and to the Lamb!” ¹¹ And all the angels stood round the throne and round the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, ¹² saying, “Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God for ever and ever! Amen.”

Notice the universal origins of the uncountable multitude. From all nations, all tribes, all peoples, and all languages. I read this as meaning, “not just the 144,000,” those described just before our reading. That is a countable number. So, who are the uncountable people in the white robes? Interestingly, that’s exactly the question that the “elder” asks John. In some translations, the word used is “angel” rather than “elder.” We read:

¹³ Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, “Who are these, clothed in white robes, and whence have they come?” ^{14a} I said to him, “Sir, you know.”

I can’t help but chuckle a bit to myself when I read this. Possible answers that come to my mind are, “*You are asking me?*” Or, “God knows!” It’s like being on a tour with a group in some foreign country, and the tour guide asks you, “Who do you suppose is portrayed by this statue?” John makes a polite response. The New Revised Standard translation gives his reply as, “**Sir, you are the one that knows.**” In other words, “I don’t know.”

This question provides the occasion for the “elder” to deliver verses 14 to 17.

^{14b} And he said to me, “These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

**¹⁵ Therefore are they before the throne of God,
and serve him day and night within his temple;
and he who sits upon the throne will shelter them with his presence.**

**¹⁶ They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more;
the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat.**

**¹⁷ For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd,
and he will guide them to springs of living water;
and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”**

These verses may have been a special form of hymn sung to prepare those expecting to be martyred for their coming ordeal of arrest, trial, sufferings, and death. (II Timothy 2:11-13 may be another such hymn.) These of the multitude have endured the “great tribulation” and are now enjoying life beyond with God. Further details are added later in *The Revelation*, especially in the vision of the New Heaven and the New Earth in Chapters 21 and 22. But the central message is here.

To John's readers, he is conveying that they must endure, stay faithful to Jesus and to God, and endure but a little while longer. God will be there for them, and they, too, will join this multitude.

I'd like to point out a few details. It is the "blood of the Lamb" which had made their robes, and them, clean of sin. That is, anything that would offend God. It's a contradiction of reality that blood would clean robes to white. To the Jews, blood represented life. That is the reason for certain of the kosher laws. It was inappropriate to consume the "life" of an animal with its flesh. The life of the animal belongs to God. Just as with the Jewish sacrifices made on the altar at the temple, the life of Jesus was poured out for all of us, all of humanity, and this great multitude of saints, in the crucifixion. That life poured out cleanses us of sin. Yes, real blood would make a mess of clothing. But the symbolism of blood as equating to life makes sense. A second inversion of logic occurs later in verse 17. The Lamb becomes our shepherd. Shepherd literally means "sheep herder." But now things are reversed; the Lamb becomes our shepherd. I am reminded of Jesus's words, "**The last shall be first and the first last.**" (Matt.20:16) With God, amazing things are possible that defy our earthly logic.

In the Roman context, white was a color associated with victory. The great multitude of saints is not battered and weary from their ordeal. They are victorious and celebrating! The palm branches are also a symbol of victory. Recall the palm branches waved before Jesus on Palm Sunday, on his triumphant entry into Jerusalem. The people shouted "Hosanna!" a cry of praise to God, on that occasion. We now know that He would suffer and die a few days later. In so doing, he would achieve a great victory over death. His Resurrection, witnessed by many people, from Mary in the garden, to the apostle Paul much later, is the sign of what God intends for us.

Verses 16 and 17, describing what our time with God will be like, may sound very familiar.

- ¹⁶ They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more;
the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat.**
- ¹⁷ For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd,
and he will guide them to springs of living water;
and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."**

These verses very closely follow Isaiah 49:10. The voice of Psalm 23 seems to ring through these words as well.

What we see in *The Revelation*, as far as the imagery and message is concerned, is consistent with the Gospel and the *Old Testament* writings. Early in the second century, *The Revelation* was an important source of hope and comfort. It was considered to be authoritative by a church under persecution. The persecution was getting so bad, that the end times seemed to be occurring right then. There have been other times, during the two millenia since, that the end times seemed to be drawing near. To people living through such times, *The Revelation* has been an important source of hope and strength.

I think it is important to remember that this is a vision. This vision was given to John about 100 A.D. He sees things like horsemen with swords. He understands the heavens with the perspective of a man of his own times. I think we need to assume that God has given him this vision in terms and images that he can understand. That doesn't include machines that fly or computers or cellular phones. We really are very limited also, just as John was, in things that we can comprehend. We can't understand fully what life will be like beyond the bounds of time. Mark Twain wrote that the character Huckleberry Finn didn't want to go to heaven. He understood heaven as just going around playing harps and singing. He didn't see that as appealing. That remains a common stereotype. But, we can trust God. He will make of what comes for us an interesting and fulfilling experience.

So, we can wonder at what we read, and ask God to help us understand what we need to know. The central message, however you read the details, is clear. God loves us and will care for us. We will be home with Him when our days in this age are done, and we will be happy there, whatever the details, and however it works. We don't have to understand all of those details to know what to do in the present: remain faithful, and be beacons of light to others.

So, today, let us give thanks, in this season of Thanksgiving, for the saints. Let us thank God for those in our lives who have gone before us, those who have been examples of faith, of love, of caring, for us to see and emulate. They have been, and still are, examples of God's love and caring in action. Love and caring for each of us. It is left to us to do as Jesus said, "Go and do likewise."

Amen.