

Sermon for the Feast of All Saints
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Holy Nativity, Plano
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Today, we celebrate the Communion of Saints. We rejoice in the fact that we have a mystical connection, in the body of Christ, with all of those who are “holy”, all people who have been set apart, as we have, for the service of God. We have fellowship with those faithful who have gone before us, just as we will have fellowship with those who come after us. As we are in tribulation in the Church Militant here on earth, we not only hope to pass on into the Church Triumphant, but we actually commune with those who already have.

Our reading from Revelation this morning is an interlude in the very midst of tribulation. The Lamb has appeared who is worthy to break the seals on the scroll of judgment. He has broken six of the seven seals one by one, and John sees in his vision different aspects of judgment released upon the earth, until the sun is blackened and the stars fall and the mountains are uprooted in an earthquake. And the people are so terrified that they call to the mountains, “Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb; for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand before it?” Six seals have been broken. Only one remains to open the entire scroll of judgment and unleash the wrath of God upon the unfaithful earth.

Of course, we are only in chapter 7 out of 22, so you know that the end of the book can’t be in sight yet. But the whole book of Revelation works as a sort of spiral staircase. We keep revisiting the same territory, but not quite in the same way. Different and greater aspects are brought out. The seventh seal, once we get there, rather than completing the story, sort of opens out and expands. We find ourselves facing another rank of the spiral, at the beginning of the seven trumpets. The tension increases, as we understand more and more about the end of history as we know it.

But here before we mount to the next rank of the spiral, we are treated to another vision first. It’s not that this part happens between the sixth and seventh seals. This vision does in the midst of the book of Revelation what the book of Revelation does for us now. It reaches out to the very consummation of God’s plan, what theologians call “eschatology”, and presents it in such a way as to make it applicable in the present circumstances. In other words, it’s not supposed to give us a roadmap for the end of time. Rather, it describes for us symbolically where we are going, so that we can make our lives fit with our destination.

And so, this vision is the answer to the question just asked by the terrified people: “Who can stand before the wrath of God?” Four angels are standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the destructive winds of God that he is about to unleash upon the earth and its inhabitants. And who will withstand this final destruction? Those who are sealed on their foreheads as servants of the living God. In other words, those whom he recognizes as belonging to him.

There are 144,000 of them. They are arranged in 12 groups of 12 legions each. Twelve, of course is for the twelve tribes of Israel. But twelve is also a number of completion and finality. The idea is that it is all the people of God, arrayed for battle. Even the lost tribes of Israel are restored and completed in the army that is here consecrated to the Lord. The 144,000 sealed means that no one is left behind who has given themselves to Jesus. Not you, not me, not anyone, as long as we want to belong to Jesus. Make no mistake; God doesn't end it all without protecting and saving everyone who belongs to him.

The vision then shifts from the earth to the heavenly throne room, where the great multitude cries out, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits upon the throne, and to the Lamb!” If the 144,000 are the completion of the Church Militant here on earth, the great multitude which no man could number is a vision of the same crew from the other side of eternity. This is the Church Triumphant, those who have finished their race and have gone to the presence of God. And this is our destiny, to share with them in the final fulfillment of God's plan.

The multitude is clothed in white robes. They are white, because the saints have won. They are victorious over tribulation, over sin and death, but only because they have put on the righteousness of Christ. They have washed the robes in the blood of the Lamb, and the red blood shed for them on the cross paradoxically makes their robes white, clean, pure. And they wave palm branches, just as the crowds did when Jesus made his triumphal entry into Jerusalem.

In the tribulation, the presence of God terrified the unfaithful. But for those who come out of the tribulation, the presence of God is shelter to them. They are before the throne of God continually, worshipping him. That might sound terrible and boring to us, but that's because we have to work ourselves up to worship. For them, it is just a day spent with the person they love most in the world, God.

Best of all, it will be completely satisfying. No more hunger or thirst. And not just physical hunger and thirst. “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they *shall be satisfied*.” When Jesus said that, he meant it! Even though he is the Lamb, he will shepherd us. He will give us the water of life, and wipe away the last trace of earthly sorrow.

In the Mass, and in our prayers, we commune with those who have arrived. In our worship together, we open a window into heaven. The saints in the Church Triumphant are present with us as we join in their constant worship. In our daily lives, as we give up more and more of ourselves to God and become more and more *his*, we also can get glimpses of the presence of God. We open ourselves up to the Kingdom of God breaking in, and we are one with all the saints in the worshipping Body of Christ.

All this is ours, but we are not there yet; not constantly, the way the Church Triumphant is. We are still in the midst of the battle. We are the Church Militant, and our sight is still imperfect from the blood and sweat and smoke and stench and agony of the battlefield. Even in the book of Revelation, if you read further than this passage, the narrative will go back to war and destruction. St. John gives us the vision of Triumph to hold before the eyes of our hearts, because the battle is still painful. But we can fight on against our sinful flesh, against the fallen world around us, against the great enemy and deceiver of God's people. We can fight on, knowing that we already have a place among the victors. We can fight on, knowing that the battle belongs to the Lord. And he will not leave behind any of us whom he has claimed.