

All Saints 03 November 2024
1 John 3:1-3
St Peter's Lutheran Church, Elizabeth
Greg Bensted

Grace and peace to you from God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure. Let's pray: ...

Yuri Gagarin, the Russian cosmonaut, was the first man in space. When orbiting the earth, he remarked sarcastically that he didn't see God out there.

There was a time when people pictured themselves at the centre of a three-layered universe: heaven above; earth in the middle; hell, down below. For many people, the eternal home of God and the blessed, was a physical place above the clouds, while the eternal home of the devil and the damned, was a physical place below the earth.

Yes, there was a time when Jews and Christians expected God to be "up there." People thought that the earth was flat, with a canopy stretched above called the firmament, where the sun, moon and stars were fixed, and the angels moved the stars around the night sky choreographing the dance of the spheres.

But even Martin Luther rejected the idea that heaven was somewhere "up there" and hell "down below." Luther said that Jesus' ascension to the right hand of God wasn't spatial; rather, that Jesus had come into his heavenly power. The heaven of faith isn't what astronauts imagine. God is infinite, invisible, and incomprehensible, and can't be located in space or limited by time.

What we do believe is this: God has a place for us after death that's more wonderful than anything we can imagine. God has revealed to us that life with him will be like this:

- We will see God face-to-face.
- Our Saviour will wipe away every tear from our eyes.
- We will have bodies that will never suffer pain or wear out.
- There will be no want or sadness or sorrow.
- There will be music and singing, worship and banqueting.
- People from every land and tribe and station will gather—kings and commoners—entering glory and rejoicing.

In three short sentences from St John's First Epistle, the apostle proclaims our hope. Because of God's love for us, we are his children now. We are like the Lord, children of a loving heavenly Father. We are children of God and heirs of God's kingdom. In our baptism, God released us from the shackles of the realm of sin and suffering and death, and placed us under his rule which is life and eternal life. Our sins have been forgiven through Jesus Christ, we have been robed in Christ, and we live in the promises of Christ now and forever.

This is our hope, sisters and brothers; the beatific vision as described by Christ in the Gospel lesson today. To see what we now can only trust and believe; to see and know God.

As St John puts it, "We will be like God, for we will see God as he is." St Paul describes our life now as seeing in a mirror dimly, but looking forward to seeing face-to-face... and knowing fully even as we have been fully known [1 Corinthians 13:12]. Moses was only permitted to see God's back from a cleft in Sinai's rocks [Exodus 33:22,23], but we have the promise of Jesus in the Beatitudes that the pure in heart will see God. We will see God and know God. All things will be made clear to us; all knowledge and wisdom and understanding. Nothing will remain hidden from us.

It has been the hope of all the ages that we will again know God just as God knows us. Ever since Adam and Eve were driven from the garden, we have been estranged from our world, our neighbours and ourselves. We have God's Word and God's promise but we still face cancer and dementia and Huntington's disease. Our marriages dissolve, our children and grandchildren test our resolve, and we wonder why so many bad things happen even to nice people. We wonder if death is really something worth striving for. Yet, God has implanted in our hearts both a longing and a hope that this life isn't all there is.

Jesus reminded the Sadducees that “the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob is God not of the dead, but of the living” (Matthew 22:32). And to Martha, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die” (John 11:25,26). David promised Israel, “The Lord is righteous... the upright shall behold his face” (Psalm 11:7), and “As for me, I shall behold your face in righteousness; when I awake I shall be satisfied, beholding your likeness” (Psalm 17:15). And Job confessed, “I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth;” (Job 19:25). And, “we will see [God] as he is” (1 John 3:2).

Furthermore Saints, we will be like God. John writes that even now, we are like Jesus our Saviour and Lord and brother. We follow him in faith, we’re strengthened by his example, we’re nourished by his Supper and purified by his suffering and death. The Beatitude says, “Blessed are the pure in heart”; the “clean in heart,” those who are innocent and without sin. In our epistle reading, the word translated “pure” where John writes, “All who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure,” means to be made clean, purified by God’s Word and Sacraments, forgiven by Christ’s suffering and death. It’s a ritual purity that is ours by faith. We’ll be like God even with our limitations and imperfections. Adam and Eve fell into sin because they wanted to be like God. However, we will be like God through God’s work of redeeming and restoring us in Christ.

While we live in this time of struggle and doubt, we have God’s promise of life and eternal life, albeit by faith and not by sight. We trust in God’s love and care for us but can’t even begin to imagine how wonderful it will be because “what we will be has not yet been revealed.” Still, one thing is certain; like those who have gone before us, we will see God and we will be like him, to God’s eternal glory. Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds safe in Christ Jesus. Amen.