

All Saints A [01 November 2023] 05 November 2023

Revelation 7:9-17

St Peter's Lutheran Church, Elizabeth

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

*'Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honour and power and might be to our God for ever and ever! Amen.'* Let's pray: ...

Blessed Saints, the vision revealed to us in the Revelation to John, is unparalleled in its beauty. The Christians who have died in this life are now coming into heaven, dressed in grubby, worn-out, rags, soiled by their sins. And now, as they're to come into the presence of God the Father in his splendour, and God the Son, our Lord Jesus who is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, and God the Holy Spirit, their tattered, filthy garments are removed and washed in blood; the blood of the Lamb, and their garments come out white and radiant, fit to present to the King.

'These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. For this reason, they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them' (Revelation 7:14-15).

This is the vision of All Saints Day, a glimpse of what it's like for those who have died in the faith, how they're before the Lord beholding his very face, beyond all trouble, finished with sin, fully restored; they're in bliss and at rest as they wait for the resurrection of the dead and the new heaven and new earth. All of this by the Lord's grace and mercy. By the blood of Jesus, they're washed and made clean.

This is an encouragement for all of us. We think about those who have gone before us, who rest from their labours, who behold the face of God, whose tears have been wiped from their face, and draw encouragement from believing this is what lies in store for us.

In this life we're surrounded by discouragement. Many things wear us down, but underlying them all is a spiritual weariness, a pressing weight that makes it hard to get up and do anything. Going to work is that much more difficult. Running errands becomes daunting. Our once youthful exuberance gives way to age and infirmity. And this spiritual discouragement turns our Bible into a lump of lead, making us feel as though we have to limber up before we have the strength and confidence to open it.

It's not that we don't want to read our Bible, pray, or gather to worship God, but discouragement makes it seem that much more difficult. We want to come to church, but there's something in the way, an excuse, an obstacle, something that we'd normally work through, but it doesn't seem like we have the energy or the will to fight. Or, for us who are here, we fight but it's tough, and there's sometimes not as much joy and life in our singing and hearing of God's Word.

This happens to all of us at some time as the devil subtly attacks us with discouragement.

One of the antidotes to discouragement is the beauty of All Saints: It encourages us and reminds us of the joy set before us.

So, let's hear some of this encouragement. In [Hebrews 11], we're reminded of some of the heroes of the faith in the Old Testament. We hear of Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Sarah, Joseph, Moses, Rahab, Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, and the prophets [:4-34].

We hear of "Women [who] received their dead by resurrection. Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented— of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground. [:35-38].

Our ancestors in the faith wandered this world in suffering, and while it sounds disheartening, hear the hope and encouragement that follows in [Hebrews 12:1,2]:

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.”

If we embrace this picture, we'll find encouragement. We're running a race, and we're exhausted. We feel that our legs won't carry us for much longer. All we want to do is quit, lie down, and give up. Yet, the finish line is in a stadium, and the last leg of the race is around its track. As we drag ourselves into the stadium, we're met by seats filled with all those who have run the race before us, all those who have crossed the finish line. [Now, I want you to close your eyes as you listen to these next two paragraphs].

There's Julian in the front row, and Brenz and Lila and Adele, Hildegard and Ella and John and Barry, Mary and Audrey and Wally and Rene, Pat and Myrtle and Joy, John and Gertraud and Eric, Auriel and Tony and Tina – the list goes on, and they're cheering for you, “You can make it!” And there behind them you see all your other loved ones, your grandparents who gave you your first Bible, your parents who brought you to baptism, the pastors who preached the gospel to you, all cheering you on. And behind them are all the great fathers and mothers of the faith. There's Clement and Lydia, Polycarp, Monica and Augustine, Martin and Katharina Luther. There's John, Peter, Andrew, Paul, Mary, Joseph, Elizabeth, John the Baptist, Micah, Joel, Amos, Daniel, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Elijah and Elisha, King David and Samuel and Hannah, Joshua and Moses and Aaron, Joseph and Israel and Isaac and Abraham; one great cloud of witnesses, with their life and their death, with their faith in Christ, with their victory, all encouraging you with: “You can make it. It's worth the struggle. It's worth the wait. It's worth the pain. Keep the faith. Finish the race.”

The vision is breathtaking, exhilarating, tear-jerking, thrilling. As you look from face to face, they're all cheering and pointing you to the finish line, and there on the other side is... Jesus. Jesus waiting for you. Jesus with joy in his eyes. Jesus with a smile on his face. And when you see him, all your weariness melts away. Oxygen saturates your lungs. Strength courses through your legs. You shrug off any hindrance and break into a sprint. You lurch forward, cross the finish line, and claim your prize; the crown of righteousness. [Now, open your eyes and take a moment]

Therefore, since we're surrounded by the same great cloud of witnesses, let's lay aside every weight and sin which clings so closely, and let's run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith.

But wait, there's more...

Hear further encouragement from St Paul in [Philippians 3]:

"Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus" (:12-14).

And again, when St Paul is about to die, he writes to Timothy:

"As for me, I am already being poured out as a libation, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give to me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing" (2 Timothy 4:6-8).

Friends, the fight is fierce. The warfare is a slog. The race requires endurance. But you're surrounded by a cloud of witnesses. You're surrounded with saints and are encouraged not only by those who have gone before you, but by those with whom you run. Look around you. See your fellow saints, all racing toward Jesus. And see who's not here, those who have become weary, and remember to encourage, help, and strengthen them as we all press toward the goal.

It won't be long, friends. Rest will come. The One who began a good work in us will bring it to completion.

Dear Saints, one day, God, in his wisdom will withdraw his breath from us, and we'll go home. We'll rejoice in the victory of Jesus, his victory over sin, death, and the devil. Death will give way to life, tears will give way to joy, sin will give way to bliss, and, dear friends, until that day, we fix our eyes on Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God, surrounded by a great multitude who've gone before us, angels and archangels, elders and the four living creatures... all the company of heaven. *'Amen! The blessing and the glory and the wisdom and the thanksgiving and the honour and the power and the might be to our God for ever and ever! Amen.'*

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