

Revelation 7:9–17 (All Saints’)
Kaiserslautern Ev. Luth. Ch.
November 6, 2022

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

Dearly bought hearers by the blood of Jesus Christ,

Today we observe the Festival of All Saints, a day to remember all those who have gone before us in the faith. All Saints’ Day actually falls on November 1, but we are observing it on the following Sunday. The day before All Saints’ Day, October 31, is Halloween, All Hallows’ Eve, or the eve of All Saints. Martin Luther chose to post the 95 Theses on the Eve of all Saints because of the abuses associated with that day—the buying and selling of the merits of the saints to relieve souls in purgatory. That’s how All Hallows’ Eve also became Reformation Day. In many parts of the world there are still traditions deeply rooted in the celebration of All Saints’ Day. Of course, there’s Halloween with its ghoulish and morbid associations. There’s also the Day of the Dead in Latin American countries, where family members visit family graves, build home altars, and feast in honor of the deceased. In Roman Catholic areas of Germany, the Sunday before All Saints’ Day is called “Mantelsonntag,” or “coat Sunday,” because the stores are open so people can buy a coat to wear while visiting the cemetery on All Saints’ Day.

The many traditions surrounding All Saints’ Day and the honoring of the dead can seem over-the-top or even borderline idolatrous to non-Roman Catholic Christians. The way dead ancestors and relatives are honored might remind us of pre-Christian, pagan worship practices. And in many ways that’s true. People have a natural tendency to turn to the dead. We feel a connection with those who have gone before us and at times the church has allowed or even promoted undue regard for the dead. On the other hand, many Protestants end up downplaying those who have gone before us and reject any role of the Saints in our lives. There is a fear that

any attention given to the saints will draw our attention away from God, so the deceased and all the saints are simply ignored.

All Saints' Day, then, gives us the opportunity truly to reflect on the role of the saints in our lives. We neither worship the saints and look to them for forgiveness of sins, nor do we downplay how God has worked through those who have gone before us. On All Saints' Day, we have the opportunity to thank God for our departed brothers and sisters in Christ, learning from their example of faith, hope, and love. We are encouraged in our own Christian lives as we consider the lives of those who have passed from the great tribulation of this world to eternal glory, until we join them around the throne of the Lamb. This morning we consider all the saints who now rest from their labor. Here, they feebly struggled; there, they shine in glory.

In Revelation 7, we have a picture of all the saints worshiping before God's throne. The Apostle John says: "After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, 'Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!'" The saints come from all times and places and cultures because the church transcends all times, places, and cultures. The saints in heaven come from all over the world and lived at all times throughout history. That's why there are too many for us to even count.

But today we think especially about the saints we have known in our own lives, those made holy by God in our own families, among our friends, or in congregations we have been part of. In many churches, All Saints' Day is celebrated by naming all the faithful of the congregation who have died in the previous year. The name is read and maybe even a bell is tolled. Do you have anyone in mind on this All Saints' Day? Are there any Christians you know

who have died in the last year? Or Christians you always remember on this day? You might think about parents or grandparents, children or grandchildren. Maybe it's a pastor or a teacher or an older congregation member who set a Christian example for your life.

The Apostle John learns that those clothed in white robes and standing before God's throne are "the ones coming out of the great tribulation." When we think of those who have died in the Lord, we think of the troubles and trials they faced in this life. The tribulation they faced is the same tribulation we face and will continue to face, the tribulation that comes from living as Christians in a fallen and hostile world. Our hearts and minds and bodies which were meant for eternity instead experience corruption and decay, from the day we are born until the day we die. We recognize the effects of sin inside of us and all around us. It is often in seeing our loved ones die or hearing of problems in every corner of the world that we consider mortality and what it means for us to be sinners in this sinful world. It means that we, too, will die; and when you think about it, our final day is not really that far off. The years go by much more quickly than people realize. Someday soon, your name will be read at an All Saints' Day Service, the bell will toll for you, and loved ones will remember you until they, too, join you.

For Christians, though, the death we await in this life will not harm us because in Baptism we have already died in Christ Jesus, and so we will also be raised with Him. In Revelation 7, John sees the saints clothed in white robes, a picture of Holy Baptism. In Baptism, our God has clothed us with the garments of salvation and covered us with the robe of righteousness (Is 61:10). As the Apostle Paul puts it in Galatians 3[:27]: "as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ." In Baptism, we put on Christ like a garment of clothing. The righteousness of Christ covers all our sins and our shame so that we can stand before God in righteousness and purity forever, just like the saints who have gone before us.

You, the baptized, have washed your robes and made them white in the blood of the lamb, in the blood of Jesus Christ. He suffered the greatest tribulation on the cross, tortured not only physically, but spiritually as well. He was despised and rejected by men, persecuted for righteousness' sake, reviled and falsely accused. Jesus is a man of sorrows, poor in spirit and acquainted with the grief we experience as humans. Jesus cried when He lost his dear friend Lazarus. He understands our grief when we lose loved ones. Jesus wept over Jerusalem. He understands our pain when we see the tribulation of this fallen world.

Baptized into Jesus, we experience these tribulations even as all the saints before us experienced them. That's why we can look to the saints who have gone before us as examples to us in life and in death. We see how they lived in the forgiveness of Jesus and we see the outcome of their way of life. These Christians remained faithful unto death and now they wear the crown of life. Trusting in Jesus Christ, they could face the tribulation, the rejection, and the loss we too experience in this world. And yet by God's grace they overcame. If you've ever sat at the deathbed of a Christian, you might have seen what this faith unto death looks like. The saints have become models for us to imitate as we, too, run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who first endured the cross and then entered into glory.

Of course, there is still an amount of sadness knowing we won't see our loved ones again in this life, that we have to wait until the Last Day to be reunited with all the saints. Many people still long for some kind of a connection with their departed friends and family, which is why there are traditions like visiting the cemetery around All Saints' Day. Many people long to be near the earthly remains of their loved ones, to experience, to give thanks, and to remember. Cemeteries are a wonderful reminder that our dead bodies are placed into the ground not to get

rid of them, but as a holding place until the resurrection of all flesh. The word “cemetery” literally means “dormitory.” A cemetery is a place for bodies to sleep as they await reunion with the soul that worships before God’s throne.

Many of us find ourselves far away from the earthly remains of our loved ones. We don’t have the opportunity to visit family graves like we might like. And yet we have something even better. In the Lord’s Supper, heaven comes to earth as the Lamb feeds us with His very body and blood. The altar becomes God’s throne as our Lord comes to shelter us with His real presence. With Christ’s body and blood, we neither hunger any more nor thirst anymore because in Christ we have everything we need. The Lamb in the midst of the throne is our Shepherd, guiding us, His little flock, to springs of living water. There God will wipe away every tear from our eyes as our sadness and longing turn into joyful reunion. In the Lord’s Supper, we are united with the entire body of Christ, even with those members who are no longer with us on earth. That’s why in the Proper Preface, that part of the liturgy right before the Sanctus, the pastor chants about how Jesus overcame death and the grave and by His glorious resurrection opened to us the way of everlasting life. Therefore with angels and archangels and with all the company of heaven, we laud and magnify God’s glorious name. “With all the company of heaven” includes all the saints, all your family and friends who have died in the faith. You are never nearer to your departed loved ones than when you receive Christ’s body and blood in the Lord’s Supper.

Today we remember all those saints who have been transferred from time to eternity. We thank the Lord for the entire body of Christ, the Church, including those members we won’t see again until eternal life. We continue to cherish their memory and their example until at last our Lord brings us to Himself, where our souls will wait to be reunited with our bodies when our Lord Jesus Christ returns on the Last Day. Then we will rise from the dead in our bodies and join

all those who have died in the faith, evermore worshiping and praising our Lord together in the new heavens and the new earth. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. We stand for the Offertory.