

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Watertown, WI**

**“For All the Saints”
All Saints’ Sunday-2022**

“After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and people 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!’” (Rev. 7:9ff).

In John’s vision of heaven, the saints are standing before the throne and before the Lamb. Who are they and what do they do?

John says they are all clothed in white robes, waving palm branches and celebrating Jesus with all their might. It’s a great multitude no one can number. Sounds sort of like the promise God made to Abraham about his descendants, that they will be “as innumerable as the stars in the sky and the sand on the seashore.” They are from every nation, tribe, and language, yet with one voice they are praising the Lord.

Often, we think of the saints more narrowly, as a relatively small group of martyrs who suffered all rather than renounce the faith. With their tremendous faith they propelled the Kingdom of God forward, so we named churches after them and set aside dates on the calendar to remember when they were martyred. There’s truth to that. Those martyred for the faith are certainly among the saints, and the Christian witness is never stronger than when it is suffering.

But we error if we think of the saints as only those who were martyred, or if we think of the saints as holy people on earth who never knew doubt or weakness, or never blurted out a foul word when they stubbed their toes, or never coveted anything or anyone; their hearts were always set on things above, not on earthly things. We error if we think of them like we often see them: as plaster saints, stoic, stony and stationary, not made of frail flesh and blood like you and me.

When we think this way about the saints, we know we don’t belong. We are not giants of the faith. We’ve not been persecuted really. God hasn’t used us in mighty ways. They won’t be naming any churches after us. Moreover, we know our sin. It is always before us. Therefore, we do not think of ourselves as among that number.

In a book entitled “The Innocents Abroad”, Mark Twain writes about a group of Americans (along with Twain) who chartered a ship in 1867 and went on a long tour of Europe and the Holy Lands. Their first stop was a group of islands under the Portuguese flag known as the Azores. Twain and his shipmates toured a cathedral in a village called Fayal. It was rather run down, well past its prime. Inside it was decorated with the statuary of saints. Twain described them as [quote] “a swarm of rusty, dusty, battered [saints] standing around the filigree work, some on one leg and some with one eye out but a gamey look in the other, and some with two or three fingers gone, and some with not enough nose left to blow – all of them crippled and discouraged, and fitter subjects for the hospital than the cathedral.”

That’s probably a better description of the saints than the narrow one we carry around in our brains. The saints of God on earth are crippled by defects, inside and out, and discouraged by failures. The saints of God on earth are fully human, with all the flaws and weaknesses and sin that we know. Moreover, you won’t recognize them on earth by a halo or a certain glow or by their celebrity good looks.

Who are the saints? The text tells us: “These are the ones who have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.” That’s a fancy way of saying they are people who have sinned and done evil, but then God forgave them because Jesus died for them on the cross. So, they are people like you and me. They are people who believe in Jesus as Savior, people who have been baptized, people who wear Christ’s cloak of righteousness as a gift given to them, made white in the blood of the lamb.

Blood is not a bleaching agent . . . unless we’re talking about the blood of Jesus, the Lamb of God whose blood washes away all our sin. That’s what the white robes symbolize.

White is a hard color to wear in a dirty, greasy world. Sooner or later, it’s going to be soiled. So it’s not by our efforts that we could ever wear a robe of righteousness. We couldn’t keep ourselves spotless for even a day.

But Christ loves His bride, the church “and has given himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her with water through the word, and presenting her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless” (Eph. 5:27).

Remember Isaiah? “Come now, let us reason together” he says. “Though your sins are like scarlet they shall be as white as snow.”

Christ’s righteousness is yours. In Holy Baptism and the Lord’s Supper, you are washed in the blood of the Lamb. Granted, it’s a rather gruesome image, is it not, to be washed in blood? It reminds us of the gruesome death of Jesus, who paid the price so we can stand before the throne with robes white as snow.

That’s who the saints are—God’s forgiven people, people like you and me.

Now, what do the saints do? In our text, we find them praising God. When you love someone, you speak highly of them with others. You praise them. It’s natural, not forced. You know how truly wonderful that person is, and you want others to know it too.

That’s exactly what’s going on in our text. Everyone in heaven is praising Jesus. Why? It’s not because they must. No one is holding a gun to their heads. And they’re not doing it to flatter Jesus – as if they could climb the ranks of heaven and get more power or glory by buttering Him up. No, that sort of nonsense belongs on earth, if not in hell. That’s fake praise, not the real thing.

These people in heaven, they love Jesus and are praising Him because He is praiseworthy. They are praising Him because they can’t help themselves. They see Him for who He truly is, their Creator and Redeemer. When they open their mouths, praise comes out.

It doesn’t always happen that way for us because we are still a broken, sinful people. An hour a week of problematic and distracted praise is about all we can muster, and sometimes we can’t even manage that, because we’re so steeped in sin.

But one day God will create us anew, and make us right again, and whole. One day, the Lord will raise us up from dust and ashes and give us new bodies and new minds and new hearts and voices. We will join those saints in heaven and praise him rightly, spontaneously, with full heart and voice.

What else do the saints do? The text says they serve Him day and night in His temple. That would not usually be our idea of paradise. Usually, we think of leisure as the goal: sitting on a sunny beach, clinking drinks with a friend . . . or having enough money that you don’t have to serve anyone. But work and service is part of paradise.

Consider Genesis. In the beginning, God is not described as being idle or at leisure. No, he’s at work making things, creating things. And then Genesis turns to human work. “The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and keep it” (Gen. 2:15). Note: this is before they rebelled. This is before the Fall. This is no punishment; this is a good thing. The wonderful garden will provide for their needs – one of which, apparently, is the need to be doing something, something productive, something meaningful. Paradise, whether in Eden or heaven, is, at least in part, having meaningful work to do.

Luther can help us here. Before the Fall, Luther says work would have been [quote] “play and joy.” What we have left today of the original “play and joy” are just faint traces and wretched remnants. The reason, of course, is sin introduced toil to our work which often overwhelms the play and joy of work. Whatever our work is, there’s an aspect of toil to it. Luther writes, “The ground has been made utterly disagreeable by thorns, thistles, the sweat of the face, and endless vexation.” And that’s just the soil. “How much difficulty, work, and inconvenience” Luther continues, “is now involved in bringing up a child!”

In heaven, there won’t even be a trace of toil in our service. All will be made right and perfect. The text assures us. He will shelter us in his presence. They will hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes. No more death. No more toil. No more daily grind. Work and service will be “play and joy” again. We won’t want to stop. And it will be a part of our praise, even as, right now, our work on earth can be to His honor and glory.

So, one last time. Who are the saints of God? They are God’s forgiven and redeemed, washed clean and made white by the blood of the Lamb. They are you and me.

What do they do? They sing and praise and serve and work, and they count it an honor and joy to do so. Amen.