

Sermon – 11/07/21 (All Saints Day)

Text – Revelation 21:1-6

Now I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. Also there was no more sea. Then I, John, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, “Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away.” Then He who sat on the throne said, “Behold, I make all things new.” And He said to me, “Write, for these words are true and faithful.” And He said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. I will give of the fountain of the water of life freely to him who thirsts.

Theme – “New Jerusalem”

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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In our text today — and in our first reading — St. John is given a vision of heaven. Now, lots of people have lots of questions about heaven, and about what it will be like, and who exactly will be there. But, sadly, much of what people think about heaven and its inhabitants is based upon speculation and not upon what God tells us in His Word. So today, when we commemorate All Saints Day, let’s spend a little bit of time on what God DOES tell us about heaven and those who dwell there.

First of all, let’s talk about those whom John sees there in heaven. A great multitude, that no one could count, he says. From every nation. From all tribes and peoples and languages. That in itself is wonderful, isn’t it? Sometimes we forget just how many Christians there are; we see ourselves surrounded by a hostile world, constantly attacked by Satan and his allies, with the prevailing tide threatening to sweep us away. In our country it isn’t so much overt and physical persecution and pressure as it is subtle and constant erosion. Little by little, it seems that the

world around us is peeling away the things we used to take for granted: morality, right and wrong, values, the Law upon the heart (as St. Paul puts it). We see that in the legalization of abortion, in the push for homosexual marriage, in the denial of common ethics. We find it in the increasing problems among our youth: lack of respect for authority, self-centeredness, drug and alcohol problems at earlier and earlier ages. We hear it on TV and in movies: coarse and vulgar language, the near-unanimous portrayal of Christians as hypocrites and fools, the mockery of values and decency.

It is easy for us to feel like we are fighting a losing battle, that the world around is going to hell in a hand-basket, and that there is nothing we can do to slow it down, let alone stop it or reverse it. It is easy for us to feel isolated and out-of-step and alone. But St. John reminds us that we are not. No, there is a vast array of folks like us who still believe what God and His Word tell us: that there IS right and wrong – as found in the commandments of God – and that even though we do sin against those commandments, there is forgiveness in Jesus, our Savior from sin/death/devil. How great it is to know that we belong to a family – a HUGE family – made up of people from every country, from every race, from every language, all around the world! When we get to heaven, we will see all of them – black and white, old and young, male and female – we will all be there, together!

St. John also tells us that these people in heaven are standing before God's throne, wearing white robes and with palm branches in their hands, singing God's praises. They stand before God's throne — not as defendants on trial, but as children gathering around their loving Father. Think of it like a family get-together, like at Christmas. Everyone is together, having fun, enjoying one another's company, all grouped around the head of the family. God is on His throne, the saints are around Him, but they are there as His dear and beloved children. And, doting Father that He is, all that is our Father's He gives and shares with us, His children. As His

children, we are told that we will rule alongside of Him. Imagine that! All the wonders and joys of heaven, and they are all for you! A gift from your Father.

And how did those saints become God's children? Is it because they were such nice people? Because they were smarter, or funnier, or richer, or better than the rest? No. It is simply because they have washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb. And that is key – so much so that it must be the core of everything we say and do as the Church.

Apart from the Lamb, and His blood shed for us, we would *never* be around that throne. We would never be God's children. We would never be singing His praises, but only wailing over our damnation. For that is precisely what all of us deserve. Our robes would be incredibly spotted, filthy, tattered, and foul – for we are all sinners. Sinners by nature, inherited from our ancestor Adam. Sinners by our own lives, our own words, our own deeds, our own thoughts. We can't help ourselves; we soil and stain ourselves every day by our sins. We could never stand before God clean and holy and righteous on our own. But all that changes with the blood of the Lamb, which washed us clean.

That blood was first spilled when the little Lord Jesus, at the tender age of just eight days, was circumcised – putting Himself under the obligation of the Law, which He then kept perfectly throughout His entire life. Not once did He sin. Not in His thoughts, His words, or His deeds. He perfectly loved His Father in heaven, and all people. And He gives US the credit for that perfect life of love and obedience, simply by trusting in Him. That is part of His saving work: coming down from heaven, to be the perfect Man for us, in our place.

But there is more to that work, isn't there? Not only did Jesus LIVE for us, He also died for us. He poured out that precious, saving blood in His Passion: as He was whipped, beaten, scourged as our King. As He was crowned with thorns by the ones He had come to save. As He was nailed to the cross, where that blood gushed forth from the nail-wounds of hands and feet, in

the spear-thrust into His side. But that blood was shed for a purpose: to pay the price for your sins and mine. All of those sins were heaped onto that shredded and torn back, hoisted onto that cross, and there He suffered the hell that ought to be ours. In the flood of Noah's day, the world was rightly judged for its sin. In the flood of Christ's blood, though, the world was redeemed – bought back from the curse it (we!) deserve. No wonder that those saints sing with such joy and love to the Lamb! (pause)

John tells us that those saints also hold palm branches in their hands. Doesn't that bring us right back to Palm Sunday! There the crowd recognized Jesus to be the promised Messiah-Savior, the King whose arrival the Jews had awaited for centuries. They welcomed Him with songs and praises, with palm branches and clothing strewn on the road ahead of Him as He rode into Jerusalem to finish His work, to shed His blood, to give His life, to suffer our hell, to give us heaven. And yet we also remember that within five short days, those very same people would be shouting "*Crucify Him! Crucify Him!*" He was not what they expected, nor what they wanted. And so they rejected their King, their Savior.

Not so, though, with those gathered around that heavenly throne. They know who their King is, and what He has done, and they forever sing their "Hosannas" – their songs of praise for the salvation He brings. Salvation belongs to Him, they cry. And He has come to share it, to give it, to all who trust in Him. What He has won at such a cost, He has given to them. Freely. Palm Sunday is completed there around that throne, as the King gives THEM His own crown of life. (pause)

Then, finally, John tells us a bit about what life in heaven is like. But notice, it is not so much what he tells us heaven is but rather it is what heaven is NOT. That is, there is no more pain, no more suffering, no more death, no more tears. All that John tells us in a positive way is that the saints are forever with God, enjoying and basking in His loving presence. Why is that all

that John can tell us? Well, it is because life in heaven is so different than life here that we cannot really grasp it.

When we talk about heaven in confirmation class, I usually tell the kids that God doesn't tell us more because we are incapable of understanding it. And that is because we have absolutely no frame of reference for perfection. We have never seen perfection, we have never felt perfection, we have never beheld God unveiled in His glory. And that is because of sin. It has ruined God's good creation. Adam and Eve knew perfection, but none of us since – except the very few that God granted a glimpse into it, such as John in this vision. And John could not put it into words. Luther said it would be like trying to describe color to a blind man. You can tell him all day long, but he still won't get it.

So, the best way for St. John to try to bring it home to us is to tell us what will NOT be there. And that is tremendous and exhilarating in itself, isn't it? To know that in heaven there is no pain, no sadness, no grief, no tears, no evil – isn't that enough to make us want to be there? And then when you top it off by St. John's reminder to us that we will be forever in God's presence – not cowering because of our sins, but standing proudly as His children – well, that is more than enough to make us desire it all the more. (pause)

As I said earlier, today we are commemorating All Saints Day. We think of all those who are in that group, surrounding that throne, singing praises to God and to the Lamb. We think of those great men and women we read of in the pages of Holy Scripture, from Adam on down. Like Noah and Abraham and Moses. Sarah and Rachel and Eve. David and Solomon, Esther and Ruth. Peter, Paul, James, John, and the rest of the apostles. Phoebe, Eunice, Lois, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of our Lord, and so on.

We think of the great saints of history since Bible times. Like Augustine and his mother, Monica, who spent her whole life praying for her son's conversion until, finally, he was

converted. Men like Bernard and Francis of Assisi, whose lives were spent in humble service to their Lord and their fellow-man, modeling Christ's love for all to see. Theologians like Martin Luther and Philip Melanchthon, who were so instrumental in reminding the Church that it is all about the Gospel (as we talked about last Sunday).

And, maybe most of all, we think of those we have known personally — people who taught us the faith, who showed us how to live as Christians. Parents and grandparents. Uncles and aunts. Friends and neighbors. Pastors and teachers. Maybe spouses or children. In a little bit, in our prayers, we will be remembering those among us who, this past year, departed this life in the faith and who are now with their Savior in glory.

Saints all, indeed. Gathered around the throne of God, clothed in the white robes of their faith, washed clean in the blood of the Lamb, enjoying that new and restored heaven and earth Christ promises. But we would be missing something very important if we neglect to count ourselves in that number too. Because your robe, too, has been washed in that same blood, poured out for you at Calvary's cross. How beautiful is that New Jerusalem! How we long for its coming! But, in the meantime, what joy is ours — and theirs — in our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Amen.

OS — Nicene Creed  
FE — Offertory/Offering