

All Saints' Day – 2021

Revelation 7:2-17

1 John 3:1-3

Matthew 5:1-12

You will not always be this thing that you are now. Does that make you happy? Life is good. To be sure, we are a blessed people. Faith runs through your veins. Divine love animates your heart. You have known great beauty. You have been inspired by the sacrifice of others on your behalf. You have grown wise in the company of devout men and women. You have had your spirit soar with the music of salvation, the melody of the Gospel, the harmony of this Divine Service. And still this truth remains: You will not always be this thing that you are now. Does the thought of death bring hope or dread?

God gives His church a vision of heaven. Why is that? St. John the Divine, St. John the Seer was given a vision of heaven to record for Christ's church, for us. Why? The book of Revelation is of a world beyond our own, but very near. The book of Revelation is a portrait of Christ, a Biblical portrait of reality, our future, a portrait of heaven. Why do we have it?

This world is intense. The stimulation of living is intense. We have senses that are exceptionally vivid. Touch, taste, sight, smell, hearing – powerfully we experience this creation. Our emotional palette is equally intense – anger, exhilaration, romantic love, sorrow, satisfaction, joy, and on and on and on. Living in this world can become an idol. Jesus said this: “whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life” (John 12:25). What do you think of that? Here's the truth: Some will cherish the present and miss life everlasting. Is that you? Is that me?

God wants you to be safe. You are safe in Christ's death and resurrection. You are safe nowhere else. Those who have preceded us in death, those brothers and sisters of ours who are in heaven, they are safe. The book of Revelation was written at a time when the church was being persecuted dramatically. Death was an ominous threat to believers when John was given his vision. Believers, in one part of the world or another, are always being martyred. God would breathe into us courage in the face of persecution, to enliven hope in our hearts when all seems grim, when all seems dark and oppressive. You will not always be this thing that you are now. Who would you like to be? Don't say Michael Jordan or Julia Roberts or Jeff Bezos – it's not that kind of question. What would you like to be? Don't say wealthy, flying first class, living in a mansion – it's not that kind of question either. What kind of person would you like to be?

I asked someone close to me that very question yesterday. She said “better.” Here's the path. Last Sunday, when we baptized Amber Elizabeth Dean, an ancient question was posed to the congregation – to the parents and sponsors and the whole assembly: “Do you renounce the devil? And all his works? And all his ways?” We renounce Satan and his evil. What, precisely, do we renounce? We renounce pride. We renounce deceit. We renounce selfishness, and lust, and greed, and idolatry, and doubt, and fear. Those things are in us. Our sinful nature is an abomination. No one should be comfortable with their sinful nature. It is curved in on itself. Our sinful nature justifies the most unholy thoughts and actions. Our sinful nature doesn't need

Christ, doesn't need forgiveness, puffs itself up with lies and vanity and it is nothing more than a spiritual corpse. Our sinful nature is to be renounced, crucified, put to death.

Amber Elizabeth, in front of your very eyes, was washed in the blood of Christ. The door to heaven swung open as Amber was recreated through water and the word. She is a citizen of Zion, heavenly Jerusalem, a child of the Kingdom. White garments; those who are in heaven are clothed in white robes. Do you know how the Prophet Isaiah describes our "good deeds"? He says that our good deeds are like a polluted garment – filthy rags (Isaiah 64:6). You and I, we have no righteousness of our own. Our generosity is paltry. Our mercy is conditional. Our forgiveness is half-hearted. Sin clings to us. Even the good we do for others has the aroma of our sinful nature about it. What kind of a person do you want to be? Better; I understand. White robes; those in heaven are clothed in white robes. Scripture says this: "For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on (been clothed with) Christ" (Galatians 3:27). He is our white robe. He is our blessedness. He is our future.

Four of our company have died since the last All Saints' Day. What did they want to be, in this life? What were their circumstances? What were their challenges? What do they think now? About those challenges, about their earthly pilgrimage? We walked with them. We prayed with them. We sang and communed at this altar with them – Marianne Anderson, Bill Umland, Deloris Koller and Lois Pfeil. Their faces are vivid in my mind; their faces, their faith, their personalities – they were strong, humble, loved of God and aware of His grace. How do they see us? What would they whisper in your ear? Perhaps this: "To live is Christ. To die is gain" (Philippians 1:21). Do you believe it? Like they do? What would they whisper in our ear? Perhaps this: "If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied" (1 Corinthians 15:19). Do you believe it? Do you think about it? Perhaps they would whisper this bit from Revelation: "They did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death" (Revelation 12:11). Is that part of your outlook. Do you aspire to be that person? Or, perhaps this bit from the great resurrection chapter, 1 Corinthians 15: "O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?" (1 Corinthians 15:55). All that we renounce in this life, all that still clings to us, they are free of. Our brothers and sisters in heaven, do they know more than us? Better believe they do. What would they say to us? "Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened and do not be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go" (Joshua 1:9).

What kind of person would you like to be? More like Christ or more like the unbelieving world? More like the "you" in heaven that you will be or more like the person who has one foot in the church and one foot in the septic parts of our culture? You will not always be this thing that you are now. Does that make you happy? We don't have to guess at what pleases God. He gave us His Ten Commandments. We don't have to guess at what it is that is blessed. Christ tells us. That word: Blessed... the blood of Christ drips from that word. He is the blessed One. You have been clothed with Christ. Blessedness is not an achievement; it is something that describes those who are in Christ. You are in Christ, a new creation. His righteousness has been poured into you. Anyone who reflects Christ is blessed. What is He? He is poor in spirit – He took up the form of a servant and was nailed on a cross (Philippians 2:6-8). Though He was rich in life and love and holiness, yet He took the poverty of your sin, your vindictiveness, your death (2 Corinthians 8:9). Blessed is He. He is the one who mourned over Jerusalem and its blind

unbelief (Luke 19:41-44). He mourned for them and He shed His blood for them. Blessed is He. He is the meek One. “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls” (Matthew 11:29). Blessed is He. In life and in death, He hungered and thirsted for righteousness. Blessed is He.

Merciful, pure in heart, peace-maker, persecuted for righteousness’ sake... Blessed is He. What He is He shares. What He is He gives... to you. That is what makes life sweet in this world. All that He is and does – that is what is going to endure. All that He is and does, that is what makes us holy. All that He is and does – that is what brings us to heaven, that is what makes heaven heavenly. I’m altogether unsure whose names will be read next year in this Divine Service, perhaps mine. I know that my name will be read at some point. I know that I will see Marianne and Bill and Deloris and Lois. We will celebrate and embrace and laugh and we will look at one another and know: “To live is Christ and to die is gain.”