

St Paul's Lutheran Church (Latimer, IA)
All Saint's Day – November 5, 2023
Revelation 7:2-19 – The One Church
Rev Peter Wagner

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

The perfect Israel of God, the full number of saints, sealed from every tribe and nation, from all peoples and languages. They stand before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!"

And all the angels surround the throne, and the elders and the four living creatures. Together they fall on their faces to worship God. "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen."

But who are these in white robes, and where have they come from? "These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore they are before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence. They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

On Wednesday I read these beautiful words of Revelation 7 to our brother Frank Honold, a few minutes before he departed this earthly vale of tears and entered the heavenly courts. With these words in his ears, he left the band of saints on earth and joined the band of saints in heaven.

For Frank and all the saints triumphant, their tears are wiped away. The Lamb in the midst of throne is their shepherd. The Good Shepherd has made them lie down in the green pastures of paradise. For Jesus was with them in this valley of the shadow of death. His rod and his staff, they were their comfort and guide, just as they comfort and guide us now. The Lord who pursued them with goodness and mercy, now he spreads a table before them in the presence of their enemies, their cup overfloweth. But you have the same cup too. Your cup overfloweth, for you both drink from the same cup of blessing. The same cup of the blood of the Lamb.

This is the vision of the church. All the saints together, the saints triumphant in heaven, joining us on earth as we carry on the fight of the church militant. We are the ones sealed below. Though we feebly struggle, we bear on our foreheads the seal of the name of our Triune God, given to us in baptism. God will preserve our faith. No harm can come to us. As for the faithful departed, they in glory shine. They are the great cloud of witnesses that no one can number, from every tribe and nation, the saints of the Old and New Testaments, all who looked for the consolation of Israel and found him in the Messiah. They surround us as we run the race that is set before us.

Therefore let us run with perseverance. Looking to Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising its shame.

The joy that was set before him is the glorious vision of Revelation 7. He sought to bring all the saints in heaven and on earth to himself and his throne. The marriage supper of the Lamb, the full number of saints, the bride of Christ, dressed in white robes, with all her children, baptized and pure, sealed from ever falling away.

The joy that was set before him is the joy Jesus now sees. The church militant and the church triumphant, joined in one heavenly chorus, singing forever, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!"

The joy that was set before him is the bride Jesus now sees. The bride he laid down his life to purchase, to serve her with his body and blood, to clothe her in baptism in his own righteousness, to adorn her with the righteous deeds of the saints.

The joy that was set before him was so great that Jesus counted it nothing to come down from heaven and become man. It was so great that he humbled himself and became obedient unto death. So great that he scorned the shame of the cross. So great that he came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

Dear saints, our names are among the many he came to ransom. We are the precious jewel he sought, the pearl of great price. Though our garments were as filthy rags, though the church was polluted with sin, Jesus sold all he had for us. He poured out his blood to purchase the church as his bride. To make us his holy nation, his royal priesthood, a people for his own possession.

Now the church stands in his bright presence, called out of darkness into his marvelous light. She shall never again taste death, there shall be no more weeping or mourning, for God has wiped every tear from her eyes.

And together, the saints in heaven of the church triumphant, with the saints on earth of the church militant, we all make up one church. One body of Christ. We are joined as many grapes pressed into one cup. The cup of blessing that we share in communion. We all confess one Lord and one faith. For one baptism has brought us into the church and made us sons of God.

That we on earth all drink from one communion cup is a picture of how we are united in the one church as the body of Christ. Oh blest communion, fellowship divine. United to Jesus as a bride to her husband, so that the two become one flesh. When we come before the communion rail, though hidden yet from mortal eyes, we come to the throne and altar of God, where the Lamb who was slain pours his blood into this cup, to join us in the great heavenly feast.

To come to the communion rail is to be joined as one church, to stand with the saints triumphant and fall down with them before our God. You could imagine the communion rail in our sanctuary extending out as a full circle around the altar. Extending through these walls out into the courts of heaven. There on the other side, all the saints who have gone before us are kneeling with us at the same altar. What a great comfort, as we feebly struggle. We weep over our sins and failures. We weep that our loved one have died. But here in the sanctuary of God we are joined with them, and God will wipe every tear from our eyes.

So be comforted, dear saints, as you remember those who have gone before you. They are feasting triumphantly in the courts of heaven. And be comforted, because when you approach the altar, you are feasting with them.

“Therefore since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the author 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.” Amen.

Now may the peace of God which passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, unto life everlasting. Amen.