

Immanuel Lutheran Church, Sheridan, WY  
November 4, 2007

For All the Saints

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, amen. The text for our sermon this morning comes from our First Reading, which was read earlier.

Today we observe All Saints' Day. This doesn't honor saints like one would think of in the Roman Catholic Church. Today, we remember those who have died in the faith. Saints are all those who are "knit together as one communion and fellowship in the mystical body of Jesus Christ." The saints are blessed in Christ, who is the Blessed One. They serve as an example of faith and "virtuous and godly living" to those who still struggle in this world.

While all believers in Christ in heaven and on earth are His saints, on this day the Church remembers all of God's saints who have died and now participate in the "unspeakable joys" of heaven. These saints, who trusted in the Lord in their earthly life, as members of the Church Militant, live now in His eternal peace, the Church Triumphant. They exalt and magnify His Name, look to Him, and are radiant, reflecting His glory.

Once upon a time, this world was sinless, without death and all that is harmful and takes away from the goodness that God made. Things could not have been better. Adam and Eve had an entire garden at their fingertips. Everything that they could ever need was theirs. God even walked alongside with them and they could see God and talk to Him face to face. But as we all know, paradise didn't last for long. Satan managed to get himself into the garden and tempted Adam and Eve, causing them to fall into sin.

However, prior to this, we were perfect, without sin.

As John writes in his Revelation, 144,000 Israelites were sealed, 12,000 each from every tribe of the sons of Israel. Upon seeing all these people, John says that, *“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 people whom St. John saw were indeed saints.

We need to ask ourselves this one question: what makes a saint a saint? For the Roman Catholic Church, it is a detailed process. First, the person has to be dead for at least five years; that counts any of us out! Then, once the person has been dead for the requisite period, the bishop can begin an investigation to see just how virtuous the hoped-to-be saint actually was. If the investigation turns out favorably, the documentation is turned over to Rome, where, after investigation by select theologians, the cardinals and bishops specifically assigned to handle saints take a vote on whether to proceed or not. Finally, there must be at least one miracle performed by the dead saint-to-be before the examination is completed, and one miracle performed after. As you can see, it takes quite a bit of effort to become a saint according to Rome. You can't stop working at it even after you're dead!

That is too much work. A saint is one called by the Spirit to faith in Jesus Christ, forgiven, and made holy in the sight of God. Thus each Christian, whether on earth or in heaven, is a saint. The Church is a communion of saints – a group of diverse people united by what they share in common: Jesus Christ and His heavenward calling.

If you are like many, you may wonder whether or not the Gospel is indeed working. While the effects of the Gospel may not always be visible to us, as it wasn't to John's readers during persecution, Jesus' revelation assures us it is still God's power to save. We trust in the words of God, recorded by the prophet Isaiah, who says, "*so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.*" We do not always see the Gospel's work. As a pastor, that is the most apparent. We want to see the Gospel working, doing something in a person's life, but we don't always see it. It may not happen during our ministry. It may not even happen during our lifetime, but the Word of God will accomplish what it was intended for.

The Word of God did accomplish what it was intended for. The Word of God caused Jesus Christ to come to this earth, to be born, to live a sinless life and to die, so that you and I may have eternal life. While we have eternal life, we still die a physical death here on earth. We focus on the words which the choir sang earlier: "For You have won the battle That they might wear the crown; And now they shine in glory Reflected from Your throne."

The saints, who are clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, are those who have already departed this life to be with the Lord forever and ever. They are our sainted dead today, our loved ones and all others who have gone before us, who have fallen asleep in the faith. But we also think of ourselves and other members of the body of Christ on this earth as the "saints alive." We remember the saints now, at the end of the Church Year, as an anticipation of the coming kingdom.

Jesus Christ, our Bridegroom, has given His life for us and called us His own. Our sinful name is washed away in the waters of Holy Baptism. Being baptized into Christ, we have received the Father's family name, given to us by the Holy Spirit. Now our names and the names of all God's saints are written in the Lamb's book of life. When we are brought into Christ through Baptism, nothing can keep us separated from Him because He has bridged the gap of separation with His own body and blood. Because of what Christ has done, "*they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.*" The fact that the saints are wearing white robes shows that this righteousness is not their doing but is imputed to them for Christ's sake.

As St. John writes, "*They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore...*" This is because they are in the saving, protecting arms of Christ Jesus. They no longer suffer from sin in this life because they have been made perfect. All of their needs have been provided for, because "*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.*"

As John ends our text, he paints for us a picture of the complete joy of believers in eternal glory. Verse 15 indicates that part of their joy is being in God's presence. Verse 16 describes the freedom of God's people from the effects of sin, while verse 17 again points to the source of the believers' joy in God's personal presence.

When we are brought into Christ, we receive the gifts that are given to those who are in Christ, the gifts that belong to the sons and daughters of God. We are given the waters of new life, Holy Baptism which gives new life to those who come to it. The tree of life is Christ Himself who provides the food which nourishes us, His own body and

blood. We will once again be able to see God face to face like we were meant to before, to be able to walk and talk with God and to be His own. Those in Christ will live forever with Him.

Today we remember those who have gone on before us, who continue to worship with us, just on the other side of heaven. We know this because it is in our liturgy that we speak: “Therefore with angels and archangels and with all the company of heaven...” They are the ones who confessed the name of Jesus Christ. We too who confess the name of Jesus Christ will one day be reunited with those saints who have gone on before, but more importantly, we will be reunited with the One who allowed us to enter heaven by His sacrificial death, Jesus Christ. In the name of Jesus, amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, amen.