

BEHOLD THE HOST

Revelation 7:9-17

ALL SAINTS SUNDAY

November 4, 2018

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Two Saturdays ago, eight men and three women were martyred in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania at a synagogue named Tree of Life.

They did not leave their homes on that fateful Sabbath to give their lives for their faith.

They went to weekly Sabbath services to pray, and not be preyed upon by some twisted, hateful, and soulless person, who decided, because they were Jews, they had to die.

Martyrs, for the most part, do not volunteer to die for their faith.

Neither Christianity nor Judaism encourages believers to seek out martyrdom.

Martyrdom is forced upon believers when they are faced with a terrible choice:

yield their faith and live, or

cling to their faith and die.

Unfortunately, the eleven elder Jewish faithful had no time to react to what was happening to them as they were being mercilessly targeted and gunned down.

Had they any chance of survival, they would have run and hid for their lives.

They died in a place of prayer, peace, and promise, a place named after a tree known as 'wisdom.'

They died only because they were Jews who were at prayer, and that counts for martyrdom.

Martyrdom is a form of witness to one's core beliefs.

It is a declaration under the threat of death of the priority one gives to God and the vital importance of faith and their lives.

Throughout history, martyrs have witnessed to their faith with their own life's blood.

This Sunday, called All Saints on the Church's liturgical calendar, began in the early

Church as a commemoration of those who died as martyrs for their faith.

Later, after Christianity's legalization by the Roman Emperor, Constantine, it developed into All Souls Day as a time of remembrance of all who died.

While Martin Luther chose All Saints Eve to post his 95 Theses, (what our culture celebrates on October 31st as Halloween, derived from All Hallows Eve), he expanded the meaning of this day of remembrance to remind worshipers that they are both "saints and sinners."

They are to honor and remember both the living and the dead, and to be reminded of the Church of Christ's ongoing mission to the world until Jesus' second coming.

At Grace Lutheran Church, it has become our tradition to remember those who have died since last year's All Saints celebration.

During this service of worship, we remember 'our' saints through hymns, prayers, and the recitation of their names along with the sounding of a chime.

We also float lighted candles in the baptismal font to remember their baptisms, as well as ours, and we display pictures of our deceased members.

On this All Saints Sunday, we also read from the Book of Revelation, where we hear about part of a vision of the martyred saints at worship at the foot of God's heavenly throne.

Revelation is the strangest book in the Bible.

Take the Sixth Chapter, in which a Lamb opens six seals on a scroll that leads to riders on different colored horses dealing out judgments.

In the rest of the Book, we read about the great multitude in heaven, numbering 144,000 locusts swarming out of the Abyss, John eating a little scroll, a red dragon and two beasts, a heavenly warrior on a white horse, Armageddon, the Lake of Fire, the millennium, and the New Jerusalem in the shape of a giant cube coming down from the sky.

Strange!

The cast of characters and images are bewildering, to say the least.

If you are both drawn to Revelation and confused by it, you are not alone.

This also explains the two major reactions to the ways people respond to it.

Some read it once, and never want to read it again.

They are content to forget about it.

The second common response to Revelation is to obsess over it.

Readers become convinced that we are living in the last days, where all the predictions are coming true.

I would like to think there is another way, a third way, to read Revelation.

The Church today desperately needs the vision of hope the Bible's last book provides.

Revelation was addressed originally to seven Christian churches in Asia Minor, or what is known today as western Turkey, during the First Century's last decades.

The Book begins this way in verse four:

"To John and the seven churches that are in Asia.

Grace to you and peace from Him who is and who was and who is to come . . .

And from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead and the ruler of the kings of the earth.

To Him who loves us and freed us from our sins by His blood and made us to be a kingdom of priests serving His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion forever and ever, AMEN" (1:4-5).

For the early Christians, life was hard.

For the citizens of the Roman Empire, Caesar was Lord!

To the followers of Jesus, Jesus is Lord!

So, there is an inherent conflict between those who believe in Caesar, and those who obeyed Christ.

The Book of Revelation seeks to comfort and assure the faithful who are suffering for their faith.

But it also sternly warns those who are compromising with the systems and the values of the world.

The visions of Revelation reveal Jesus, not Caesar, as the Lord of the Universe. Revelation is an unveiling, or an apocalypse of visions that communicate through pictorial language to give hope for those who have died for their faith, and those living out their faith in a crisis situation.

It is tempting for us Christians to see ourselves as an insignificant minority, or to use an Old Testament or Hebrew scriptural term, a remnant unable to tip the scales of judgment, politics, morality, or world affairs.

We can become despondent, like an Elijah, who complained to God that he was the only one true believer left in all of Israel.

The Lord informed him that there were actually 7,000 who had not bowed to idols (I Kings 9:18).

In Revelation, Chapter Seven, our reading for today, the Church is revealed as a vast host, reflecting all the diversity seen in all the entire earth:

“from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages” (7:9).

The Church is never an ingrown ethnic, denominational, or cultural enclave, but an exciting assembly of believers from all times and places.

In this vision before us, we are reminded of God’s promise to Abraham in Genesis:

“I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you . . . and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (12:2-3).

As one commentator writes:

“Heaven will be diversity without political correctness, and multiculturalism unified in one single purpose — every heart . . . and void giving glory to God and the Lamb.”

This scene envisioned in Revelation 7 is a real Palm Sunday.

The Church is revealed, not only in its vastness and diversity, but especially in the victory it has received through Jesus Christ.

This is the point of the white robes in which the saints are clothed, and the palm branches they are carrying and waving.

Like conquerors receiving their triumphal parade, the saints wear white robes and bear palm branches.

The white-robed multitude is praising God for God’s victory and salvation.

They are crying out in a loud voice, saying:

“Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne.”

And they are singing:

“Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever. Amen.”

In our culture, people seem to become delirious over a football game, a political rally, or a rock concert.

But here in Revelation is a far greater purpose and victory.

For those who have trusted fully and Christ’s promises of forgiveness and eternal life,

the vision of a future destination can be the most uplifting source of encouragement, enabling us to endure the trials and tribulations of this life with joy and hope in service to Christ.

“Who are these clothed in robes of white and where did they come from?”

These are the ones who have come out of the great tribulation.

They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.”

The are, in other words, martyrs, the stain left by the shedding of their blood whitened by the blood shed by Jesus on the cross.

After this unusual image, comes one of the most comforting words in all of Scripture.

God ***“will shelter them with His presence.***

The 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” (7:16-17).

Beloved people of God,

it is these last few words that sing to us this morning, as we gather here to remember again our blessed dead.

We all miss them dearly.

Each of us brings into this sanctuary our own losses, and each of us would likely do everything that it takes to remove our grief.

Some of our grief is very old, as the deaths of parents and grandparents or old friends are brought to mind many years after their passing.

Even though the sting of a death long past is very old, it can feel fresh.

Some of our grief is very new, as we mourn the loss of those who died since last All Saints.

Today we grieve for the ordinary saints who shared our homes, our pews, and our lives.

We mourn those who we knew well, and those we knew only in passing.

We mourn them because they were, to those of us who knew and loved them, extraordinary and irreplaceable.

But their witness was close to home, as is ours.

As we come to the communion table, I ask you to behold the host, not only the bread of life that we will share, but also that great host of heaven, that great cloud of witnesses who worship along with us as the God of hope and salvation.

May we, like they did before us, lead those who come after us to Christ and to His way.

AMEN