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St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

All Saints' Sunday

November 7, 2021

Text: Revelation 7:9–17

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

The heavenly elder asked the apostle John a question, “Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?” (Rev. 7:13). Actually, it's two questions. Who is this large multitude clothed in white robes? And from where did they come? The apostle John, the same author of the Gospel of John and the three epistles bearing his name, was overwhelmed with the heavenly vision of this great multitude surrounding God's heavenly throne. He's somewhat dumbstruck. The only answer he's able to manage is “Sir, you know” (vs. 14). So the heavenly elder tells him who they are, “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.” Who are they? They are believers, washed in the holy, precious blood of Jesus. From where have they come? The great tribulation.

Dear people of God, this is a vision and description of the one holy Christian and apostolic Church. According to vs. 9, this blood bought Church is beyond counting in size as it is made up of believers from “every nation, from all tribes and people and languages.” John's vision is that of the entire Church from all times and all places. From Adam and Eve to the end of time. She is glorious in triumph and beautiful in majesty. For she is covered with the complete and perfect righteousness of the Lord Jesus Christ. You, dear saints of the living God, are members of this glorious Church. Even now, through faith in Jesus, you are robed in the righteousness of Jesus. His deep, red blood does not stain but makes white! Quite the visual paradox from our normal human experience. No bride would want her white dressed stained with blood. But Jesus' blood works differently. It makes the recipient pure and virtuous. His Bride, the Church, of which we are all members by faith and the in-dwelling of the Holy Spirit, is clothed in bridal garments made gloriously white by the blood of Christ Jesus. Sin is what stains and makes ugly. Jesus' blood gives beauty and majesty.

Considering things from our day-to-day life on this side of eternity, such a description of Christ's Church is anything but obvious. The Church seems torn apart by doctrinal division and infighting. Her influence over life and society is always a mixture of

good and bad. The strong and powerful of this world either despise the Church outright or seek to manipulate her in order to achieve other questionable ends. She appears weak, small, and insignificant. Hardly the innumerable multitude that creates overwhelming awe, as John was experiencing in his vision.

But then again, the heavenly elder said the Church is made up of those “coming out of the great tribulation.” Tribulation is the key word describing the Church on this side of eternity. The bulk of John’s Revelation, from chapters 6 through 17, describes her incessant and continual tribulation. Since the dawn of time after Adam and Eve’s original sin, the Church has been afflicted, defeated, and distressed. To be sure, there were periods of relative peace and quiet, when the Church and her members possessed influence and material prosperity. Relatively speaking, the Christian Church in America has had peace, at least, external peace. That may be changing here and in many other places around the world. But the Church’s tribulation was always there. J.R.R. Tolkien, the 20th century author famous for writing *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, once described human history as the long defeat, though it has glimpses of the ultimate victory. The purpose of the book of Revelation was to provide Christians with a truthful, accurate understanding of history and life in this world. The exalted Lord Jesus appeared to John to describe the Church’s life of struggle on this side of eternity while also giving her glimpses into her ultimate victory and glory.

This vision wasn’t given to the apostle John during a time of ease and comfort. John was in exile on the rocky, desolate island of Patmos, just off the western shores of modern-day Turkey. The apostle John was the last of the apostles, all of whom had died a martyr’s death. John was suffering his own form of martyrdom for the sake of Jesus and the Gospel. This is how he described his exile in Revelation 1:9, “I, John, your brother and partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.”

Note two things here. First, John writes this letter to Christians whom he describes as being partners in the tribulation, the kingdom, and the patient endurance that are in Jesus. All Christians share in these three things that come from being a follower of Jesus: tribulation, God’s kingdom, and endurance. The second thing we should note from John’s description is that his tribulation, his participation in God’s kingdom, and his patient tribulation are the result of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. It ought not surprise us that we Christians face trials and tribulations. At the same time,

however, we ought to be encouraged and strengthened by the promises of God's Word that we Christians will come out of the great tribulation clothed in glorious triumph. The apostle John saw a glimpse of the hidden truth underlying the Church embroiled in tribulation. She is larger than most think consisting of people from every nation, from all tribes, peoples, and languages. She worships a risen and exalted Lord who cleanses her from all evil with His own, divine blood. Her song is recorded in Revelation 7:10, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" The Church's divine worship prompts the heavenly hosts to respond in splendid praise. Vs. 11:

And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen."

This is extraordinary, dear saints of God. The Church's worship, our worship that is taking place here today, so encourages and brings such joy to the heavenly hosts that they can't help but join in. Stop and consider for a few brief moments that this service of worship centered around the word of God and the testimony of Jesus holds the heavenly hosts captive in rapturous praise. From our perspective, everything seems so - well, normal, maybe even a bit humdrum. We've sung these hymns before using quite familiar melodies. We use this order of service almost every week. Taken together, you've heard thousands of sermons that say very similar things. Same prayers. Same pastor for a good while now. Mostly the same congregational members. At times, we might think things are a bit stale.

But nothing could be further from the truth, from heaven's perspective. The blessing, glory, wisdom, thanksgiving, honor, power, and might declared in rapturous praise by the heavenly hosts is a seven-fold hymn of triumph celebrating the God who redeems a glorious Church from the midst of the tribulation and patience of this world. What captivates heaven's attention is that we have the word of God – the holy Scriptures, the Sacraments, sermons, and we have the testimony of Jesus – hymns, creeds, confessions, the opportunity to witness to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus in the face of scorn and tribulation. The heavenly host marvel at what has been given to us. The blessed and glorious Church of the Jesus is anything but weak and defeated. This is the truth of how things really are! Even as share in the tribulation and patient endurance required for life on this side of eternity, we also, at the same time, participate in God's kingdom with the angels, archangels, and all the host of heaven.

Dear saints of God, living a Christian life in this world is difficult. Confessing the truth in all areas of life, not just the worship hour on Sunday mornings, can bring ridicule and suffering. Standing for basic truths like:

- God created the universe in the beginning by the power of His word,
- that humanity was created in God's likeness as male and female,
- there is truth and goodness to be pursued while error and evil are to be shunned,
- that moral chastity – both actual and imaginative, is good and healthy for all people of all ages,
- that marriage can only be the life-long union of one man and one woman,
- that children are gifts of God to be cherished and prayerfully sought after,
- that people are more than conglomerations of matter but are spiritual creatures,
- that the authority of fathers and mothers is the basis upon which all good societies are built, and parents have primary responsibility for their children,
- that legitimate authority, political and society, are gifts of God but they are never ultimate authorities; only God can claim and demand ultimate allegiance,
- that honesty, truth, virtue, and hard work are gifts to human flourishing, not hindrances,
- that confessing faith in Jesus and living according to His word in all of life is not an option but a necessity to which our conscience is bound...

Living in such a way will bring tribulation in this life. For we seek to be captive by the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. Do not be discouraged or surprised when you face tribulation or when patient endurance is the order of the day. When facing those days, turn to God's Word and the fellowship of Christ Church. We need one another, brothers and sisters. Help, support, and defend one another with Christ's love. John's Revelation was given so that you can know rightly who you are and how to understand rightly this long defeat called human history. We get to see glimpses of our victory. We are part of the triumphant white robed multitude gathered around God's holy throne. The blood of Jesus has cleansed us and made us majestic and strong. You are saints of God. Be encouraged and joyous as you live according to God's Word and give testimony to the Lord Jesus Christ and the triumph of His Church.

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

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