

The Church Remains Forever

Grace, mercy and peace be unto you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. [Amen]

Our text for the Feast of All Saints is from the Revelation to St. John in the seventh chapter:

And I heard the number of the sealed, 144,00, sealed from every tribe of the sons of Israel... After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages...¹

Well if it isn't abundantly clear by now, yesterday the Church of God celebrated a very important moment in her life. On the Eve of All Saints' Day, 500 years ago, Martin Luther took a deliberate step in the way of recovering the truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And that's what we've been hearing about for the past "however long." We've heard that through God's messenger Martin Luther, among others, the eternal Good News of salvation won by Jesus Christ apart from our works was brought back into the focus of the Church. So really, to sum it up, yesterday was all about the Gospel. Our reading from Revelation 14 was pretty clear on that:

Then I saw another angel flying directly overhead, with an eternal gospel to proclaim to those who dwell on earth, to every nation and tribe and language and people.²

The Gospel is eternal – and that means it will last forever. No matter how bad things get here on earth, no matter how many false teachers weasel their way into Christ's pulpit, or insert themselves into positions of secular leadership. No matter how many flaming darts Satan lets loose on the world, and no matter how many times you yourselves fall into temptation. No matter what, that truth of Jesus Christ crucified, risen, and ascended for you, will remain. It will always be there.

So, yesterday you heard that the Gospel will remain forever; and because of that reality, today on All Saints' Day you can celebrate another eternal truth. Today we are reminded of a truth that St. John got to see in detail. A truth laid out plainly in the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions. A truth inseparably linked for all time to the truth and power of the eternal Gospel... the truth that "*the One Holy Christian Church will be and remain forever.*"³

¹ Revelation 7:4; 7:9.

² Revelation 14:6.

³ Augsburg Confession, Article VII [The Church].

Today is the Feast of All Saints. And so, to use the language of our Lutheran Confessions, today is the Feast of “*the assembly of all believers among whom the Gospel is preached in its purity and the holy sacraments are administered according to the Gospel.*”⁴ Yesterday we talked about the eternal Gospel. Today, remembering that the two are forever linked together, we will consider the eternal Church.

Returning to our text then, what we hear of in John’s vision is a picture of that Church. And even though there is one Church, just like there is One Faith, One Lord, and One Baptism, interestingly enough what John sees is actually two very different yet at the same time very similar pictures of this one Church.

First, John sees an angel having ascended from the earth calling out to the four angels standing at the corners of the earth that they not harm this earth until God’s slaves have been sealed on their foreheads. What this means is that the final judgment of the Last Day will not happen until everyone who is being gathered into the Church through the seal of Gospel has been gathered. After seeing this truth, John then hears the number of the sealed: 144,000, sealed from every tribe of the sons of Israel – 12,000 from Judah, 12,000 from Reuben, and so on and so forth. This is John’s first vision of the Church... and it’s a vision of what we call the Church Militant.

The Church Militant is the whole church on earth that is waiting either to fall asleep in the Lord or for the Lord to come again. They are the ones currently in the great tribulation, eagerly waiting to come out of it. This is the state of the Church that you and I belong to now. What’s interesting is that John sees the Church Militant not from our perspective, but from God’s perspective.

And this is important, because to our perspective, when we look at the Church Militant, our brother and sisters in Christ, what we see isn’t really what John got to see. One woman I met in college summed it up nicely when she said she didn’t go to Church because she couldn’t find a church that wasn’t full of hypocrites. Even though she didn’t have a firm grasp on the Gospel, she definitely hit the law smack dab on the head. The Church Militant, that is saints on earth, down to the very last person, is made up entirely of poor, miserable, sinners. In fact, denying this reality actually puts you outside of the Church – because, as John says elsewhere, “*if you say you*

⁴ Augsburg Confession, Article VII [The Church].

*have no sin then the truth is not in you,*⁵ and the Word has no place in your life. If you're looking for a church, small "c," that isn't made up of hypocrites, well, you're not going to find it; because when we see the Church, what we actually see isn't really what John saw. What we see is that guy who everybody thinks is a jerk or a know-it-all. We see that naughty kid who won't stop misbehaving. We see that selfish person who always takes and takes, but never gives anything. When we see the Church we see our loved ones dying in a hospital bed. And we see ourselves, chief of sinners and chief of hypocrites. When we see the Church Militant, we don't really see the beautiful Bride of Christ, we see an old worn down woman, stumbling on her way to that Last Day.

But that's not what John saw, because that's not what God sees. You've probably heard it said correctly before that the 144,000 isn't referring to a literal number of believers, but to a perfect representative number – a multiple of the symbolic number of completeness: 12 times another 12, and then you tack on some zeros for good measure. You've got the 12 tribes of Old Covenant believers; the 12 tribes of New Covenant believers; and then the number 10 cubed, which was the perfect shape for the Greek mind—So,144,000—a symbolic number of the fullness of God's Church.

The point is that what God sees when He looks at the Church Militant isn't what you see. God doesn't see a bunch of hypocrites, know-it-alls, or brats. He doesn't see a Church ripped apart by false teaching, drowning in a mountain of unpaid bills because of the empty seats, or even a Church dying in a hospital bed from cancer. God sees a perfect number of perfectly organized saints, stamped on their forehead with the perfect seal that is His own Name. When God sees the Church militant, He sees saints – holy ones washed by the blood of the Lamb in Baptism and ready to fight the good fight of faith. He sees holy soldiers marked on their forehead and breast with the sign of the cross—a sign received in Christian Baptism. God sees the Church Militant for who she truly is – a perfect army of perfect saints declared perfect through the blood of perfect Lamb. He sees a Church that no matter what, will never deny her Lord. In the seal of the eternal Gospel, God has made a covenant with His Church Militant, He's made a covenant with you – a covenant which says that no power in heaven or on earth can snatch you out of His hand.

Returning to our text:

⁵ *1 John 1:8.*

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!"⁶

To confirm the truth of this Good News, this covenant God has made with His Church Militant, John sees here another vision of the Church. He sees a sight that's hidden from our eyes now, but one that's as sure and certain as the eternal Gospel. John sees the Church Triumphant-- and you know who they are as much as he did.

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.⁷

In John's two visions he sees not only what we are now in the Church Militant, but what we will be in the Church Triumphant. John doesn't just see the saints here on earth, he sees the saints in heaven, too. And in the vision of the Church Triumphant John shows us that what is hidden now will one day be made visible. He shows us that those who have died in Christ, who are coming out of this tribulation, they aren't in orderly rows like the Church Militant. The Church Triumphant appears in concentric circles around the Lamb and His throne. They aren't lined up for battle because they aren't feebly struggling in the fight of the faith. They've won.

At this very moment they're standing in a great crowd, free from sin and all its effects – free from disease, from hypocrisy, from hatred, free from sadness and free from death. Washed in the blood of the Lamb, gathered in the banquet hall like an army after battle, the Church Triumphant is standing before the throne of God crying out with a loud voice:

Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne and to the Lamb!"⁸

It's true that we Christians see misery all around us, but over the noise of the battle, as the hymn goes, "*steals on the ear the distant triumph song, and hearts are brave again and arms are strong.*"⁹

As one of my professors likes to put it, on the Last Day when all the saints of God are united in the Church Triumphant, it will be more like the end of a football game than a prayer circle. And yes, all people will take a knee in worship, for every knee will bow and every tongue

⁶ Revelation 7:9-10.

⁷ Revelation 7:14.

⁸ Revelation 7:10.

⁹Lutheran Service Book, "For All the Saints," 677.

confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. But the point is that for now we're on the edge of our seats waiting to pour out of the stands and rip up the benches as we go. And on the last day, we won't come from our graves with the gloomy faces of the Pharisees and their modern counterparts the Pietists, nor will we come out with the painted-on smiles of the fanatics. We will come forth shouting and cheering... and, to use his words, *it will be bedlam, and it will be magnificent.*¹⁰

Your loved ones who have died in Christ are at this very moment standing before the throne of the Lamb in joy, feasting on Christ in the Marriage Feast which has no end. The Feast has no end, because the Gospel has no end. And since the Gospel has no end, the Church, and those who have been brought into that Church through the waters of Baptism, they will have no end either.

The message of All Saints' Day is that Jesus Christ lives, and that means that everyone who believes in Him will never see death. The Gospel is eternal and so is the Church. For those of you in the Church Militant waiting to join your loved ones in the Marriage Feast in the Church Triumphant, be comforted in the truth that it's not going anywhere. So, for now, while we're waiting, we join them in the foretaste of the Feast to come. Amen.

**And the peace of God which passes all human understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.
[Amen]**

All Saints' Day

November 1, 2017

Revelation 7:4-14; Romans 3:19-28; John 8:31-36

Vicar Jesse Schlie

¹⁰ See D. Scaer, *In Christ*, p. 132-133.