

**“FROM SUFFERING TO GLORY:
OUR BLESSED HOPE”
Mt 5:1-12; Rev 7:9-17; 1 Jn 3:1-3**

John was given a glimpse of heaven and did his best to describe what he saw. How do you describe a reality which is so different that what we experience in this fallen world? No doubt John struggled to describe what no human had ever seen. And no wonder that the book of Revelation is so difficult for us to understand!

He writes: 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 . . .

Who might John have seen in that heavenly crowd? John was in exile on the Isle of Patmos, late in life, when he had this vision, and many of his contemporaries had been put to death—martyred for the faith. Did he see Peter? His brother James? Matthew? Andrew? Philip? Steven, the very first martyr? Paul? How comforting this vision, must have been to see his friends now safe and sound... their suffering turned into joy! To see Jesus, the Lamb on His throne, with His own gathered around Him. Perhaps he saw you too, because this is a look into the future with all the saints gathered around the throne so perhaps John saw you, too! All His promises made, fulfilled. And who, for us, is in that crowd that John saw?

- A woman whose mind was taken in this life by Alzheimers now in her right mind.
- An old pastor whose body finally wore out strong and vibrant again.
- A baby who died before she was able to be born safe in the loving care of Jesus.
- A woman overcome by cancer in perfect health.
- A old man who lived a long life with eternity to sing praises to the Lamb.
- A young woman who had been gunned down by a mentally ill person bent on revenge fully restored.
- A family killed by a drunk driver and an old childless couple, together for eternity rejoicing in the presence of the Lord.
- A father who struggled to make ends meet... a poor widow... and a man who lived under a bridge now truly rich with all needs satisfied in Christ.
- A wife who did her best, but her best was never good enough experiencing true love for the very first time in her heavenly bridegroom.
- A college student who drank too much one night and fell out a 13th story window, and a soldier who lost his legs when he was blown up by an IED fully restored and every tear wiped away.
- A prisoner who just had just been administered a lethal injection alive, well, and truly forgiven... And who else? Perhaps those we will memorialize later this morning...

Who might you see or imagine in that great multitude?

These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. Tribulation, not ease. Because life in this world is seldom easy. There's hunger, and thirst, and tears. There's trouble, trials, and temptations. There's weakness, fear, and death. And we're a little flock, hunted by the devil, hounded by his demons, and harassed by his evil, both without and within. And we often fall and fail. We're often overcome. And we look at our lives, and we look at life in this world, and we don't see blessed. We see trouble, difficulty, and sin.

And yet in the midst of such a world, we have hope. And we're given this vision of hope today. There's more than what we can see. And as the same John said today in his epistle, though we are God's children now, what we will be has not yet appeared. Who we are and what we will be is hidden now in this world of sin. But the day is coming when all will be revealed. When Jesus comes again, and John's vision becomes reality. All God's promises, fulfilled.

So saints don't often look like saints on earth. The blessed don't often look blessed. In fact, they might look quite the opposite. Martyrs don't look blessed. Those who suffer don't look blessed. Those who mourn or who are meek don't look blessed. Those who are poor in spirit and who hunger and thirst for righteousness don't look blessed. Those who are merciful are often taken advantage of. The peacemakers, too. The pure in heart are mocked, and those who dare to speak of a righteousness different than the world's, they can expect persecution. Loss of job, friends, support, reputation. It all happened to Jesus. And it will happen to those who belong to Jesus.

And yet, These are they who are blessed! He says. Over and over He says it.

That sounds foolish to many. That's not blessed! At least, not the blessed I want! Blessed is to win a billion dollar PowerBall lottery. Blessed is to be happy and have all you want. Blessed is to not suffer. Blessed is to be full and satisfied. Blessed is to have an easy life, to be well-liked, to have all your dreams come true.

Well, perhaps that last one is the key. Because what are your dreams? Are they only for this world and life? Are they that small...? Maybe it's time to think bigger. Maybe it's time to realize that maybe we don't know what blessed is, and need to be taught. Like Jesus did today. These are the blessed ones. Not the ones who seem blessed here and now, for a short time in this short life. But the ones John saw. The ones with tribulation now but blessed forever.

Hebrews chapter 11 is sometimes called the great faith chapter. It speaks of a great multitude of Old Testament saints who were waiting for the promise of God to be fulfilled - the promise of a Savior. John must have seen them, too, in His vision.

- Abel, Enoch, and Noah;
- Abraham and Sarah;
- Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph;
- Moses and the Israelites who crossed the Red Sea with him;
- Rahab, the prostitute;
- Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah;
- David and Samuel and the prophets.

And then the author of Hebrews mentions many without names: those who were tortured, those who suffered mocking and flogging, chains and imprisonment. Those who were stoned, sawn in two, and killed with the sword. And more. And we wonder: how could they do what they did? How could they stand firm? And the answer is that they dreamed bigger. They didn't dream small, of just things in this small world and short life. They knew, as we read in that Hebrews chapter, that they were strangers and exiles on earth, and seeking a homeland, a better country, a heavenly one. The one God had prepared for them.

And as John's vision shows us today, their dreams – (I mean, their faith) - came true.

All Saints Day reminds us of this truth: that the purpose of the church, the purpose of our faith, the purpose of Jesus, is not that we live a blessed life, but that we die a blessed death.

A blessed death. Sounds strange, doesn't it? Because death is the result of sin—it's the curse of sin. Death was never meant to be. Death is strange and alien to who God created us to be. And death never looks blessed. It's ugly and empty, even though it brings an end suffering and pain. But if the suffering and pain ends in this life only to continue in the next, that is not a blessed death, but a pitiable one. Because in that suffering and pain there's no hope that it will end.

But a blessed death is possible. John's vision and the saints who have gone before us testify to that. And it is one of the elders, standing around the throne in heaven with all the saints and talking to John, who tells us how. 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.

It's the blood of the Lamb, the blood of Jesus, that enables us to die a blessed death. Ironically, it is the blood of the Lamb, the blood of Jesus, that causes us tribulation in this life. That puts the satanic bulls-eye on your back. That makes this life seem, at times, anything but blessed.

But blessed are you, Jesus says. Over and over He says it! Even if you don't look like it. Even if you don't feel like it. Because Jesus took your cursed for you. He died the cursed death and then rose from that cursed death, so that you could die a blessed death and rise to blessed life. With Him. Because to be washed in the blood of the Lamb means to be washed by the blood that flowed out from Him on the cursed cross.

The blood of forgiveness. The blood that contains His life.

And you've been washed, when that blood was poured on you in your baptism. And you continue to be washed as that blood washes over you with His absolution and in the words of His Gospel. And He gives you His life as you eat His Body and drink His Blood. And you're blessed. Here and now and for forever. And you lead a blessed life and you die a blessed death. Because you're in Jesus. And in Jesus, all that's His is yours. Even if it's hidden under suffering, tribulation, and death in this world and life now.

But that doesn't make it not real. Because hidden doesn't mean not real - in fact, just the opposite. Hidden means it is here and real; you just can't see it. But John saw it. And we believe it...(saw it) by faith.

So today, All Saints Day, the saints are encouraging us. To not give up. To keep the faith. To remember to think and dream big.

On this All Saints day we also remember that we aren't alone, and that you can never be alone at church. Because where Jesus is, His angels and saints are. And Jesus is here. So here, we join them and they join us, around the Lamb. They are just hidden. You know, some older Christians can tell us stories of the good ol' days, when churches everywhere were filled, Sunday School classes booming, and confirmation classes large. John's vision shows us that the good ol' days still are—we just can't always see it.

And All Saints Day teaches us what really is. That what's called death on earth is called the final deliverance in heaven. That blessed is what God calls blessed, not what we think is. And that the day is coming when all this will be seen. When we'll see Jesus. Who, by the way, did not look blessed either. Born with animals and laid in their feed trough. Forced to flee a king who wanted to kill Him. Growing up in poverty. Opposed every step of the way. Arrested as a criminal. Mocked, beaten, whipped, crucified. But blessed was hidden in this man. And blessed is hidden in you, because Christ is in you. And when He appears, John says, we will be like Him. That is, we'll see what's been hidden all along.

And Feast that we get a foretaste of here, will be our Feast forever. No more hunger, thirst, tears, or scorching heat of tribulations. Only joy. Yes, this is the Feast of Victory for our God! His victory for all the saints. For you and me. In the Name of Jesus, Amen.