

November 4, 2018 – Revelation 7:2-17

Well, I have good news, and I have bad news. The good news is that Americans still believe in God. It's true. Despite what you may have heard or seen to the contrary, just as many Americans today believe in the existence of God as we did 100 years ago or more. Atheists have gotten louder in recent years. But America is not any more atheistic.

The bad news is that we, as a country, are going to church much much less often. Particularly, younger Americans. Despite being intensely interested in God, the Bible, heaven and hell, three-quarters of people my age have absolutely no interest in ever setting foot inside a church. Many of them can't stand the very idea of it. And the numbers only get worse the younger you go.

Which means that in the next few decades, there are going to be a lot of churches closing their doors. That's a scary thought. And it can make us feel like the Church is dying. Like there's no hope for us. That one day, the last congregation will close its doors, and the Church will simply cease to exist.

And yet, in the midst of all this, I had a colleague say something very interesting the other day: The Church never shrinks. The Church never, ever gets smaller. How could he possibly say that? As we speak, the Church is actively, rapidly shrinking, isn't it?

No, it's not. Churches are shrinking, yes. American churches especially. But the Church is a lot more than the people in these pews. It's a lot more, even, than the people sitting at home with faith in Christ who don't ever come to worship. The Church is all of God's people throughout all generations. Those below and those above. Which is to say, those here on earth, and those up in heaven.

And on All Saints Day we remember that we are not alone here on earth. This life is not all there is. The Church militant, who we see here around us, is a mere sliver compared to the Church triumphant, who stands before the throne of heaven.

That's what it means to talk about “the communion of saints” in the creed. Luther once noted that he was not particularly fond of putting a comma between “the holy Christian Church” and “the communion of saints.” He would have preferred to use the words “which is.”

“I believe in the holy Christian Church [which is] the communion of saints.” I believe in the holy Christian Church which is all of the saints who have ever lived, from Adam to Abraham, from Samuel to Solomon, from Peter to Paul, from the early church to the church gathered here today. The communion of all saints, worshiping before the Lamb on his throne. That's the picture we see in John's Revelation.

I know it's easy to look at the book of Revelation and think that's its all about the future. But Lutherans have, historically, viewed the Book of Revelation largely as a book about the past and present too. In fact, the future is only a tiny small of what was revealed to St John when he wrote it.

No, the Book of Revelation is more about revealing the true nature of the kingdom of God than it is about revealing the future. It's about cutting through the veil of mortal eyes and showing us the history of the world – past, present, and future – from God's perspective.

And it opens with John seeing God on His heavenly throne. God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit all gathered there. With the Son looking like a lamb who was slain. And he sees four angels of God's wrath sent to the four corners of the earth. Sent to destroy all of creation.

But then, in our reading today, he sees another angel “ascending from the rising of the sun.” A symbol for the dawn of creation. And that angel says, “Wait. It's not time.” From the moment mankind first sinned, God had the end of the world planned out. He had angels of wrath ready to destroy it.

But he said, “Wait. It's not time. There are still those I want to save. There are still those that I have sealed for salvation.” What is that seal on their foreheads? Well, there's only one thing in the entire New Testament that is described as a seal.

Baptism. Baptism is God's seal on our foreheads. Baptism marks us as those redeemed by Christ the crucified. God withholds destroying the entire earth, destroying all of humanity, until he has sealed by baptism all those whom he has chosen.

A group 144,000... or not. You see, again, 144,000 is a very symbolic number. It is 12 times 12 times 1000. Just as there were 12 tribes of Israel and 12 disciples, 12 represents God's people. 12 times 12, intensifies it. It represents all of God's people, Old and New Testament. And 12 times 12 times 1000 intensifies it even more. It is all of God's people of all times and all places, past, present and future. Everyone whom God will ever seal as his beloved child is part of that 144,000.

And that, it turns out, is a multitude that no human being could ever count. A multitude that only God Himself has counted. From every nation, tribe, people, and language. Standing before the throne and before the Lamb. Clothed in white, with the palm branches of victory in their hands.

And they cry out, *“Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.”* They fall on their faces and say, *“Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.”*

Who are those people? They are the saints of old. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Peter, Paul, and the apostles. The martyrs of the early church and the faithful church fathers who taught us with wisdom the meaning scripture.

Who are those people? They are your loved ones. Who died with the Baptismal seal of the Lamb on their foreheads. Who passed on with the sign of faith on their lives. Who entered the glory of heaven confessing with their mouths that Jesus Christ is Lord and believing in their hearts that God raised Him from the dead.

Who are those people? They are... us. For we live in a time of great tribulation. Just as the saints of God always have. A time of war and hardship. A time of disease and suffering. A time of doubt and disbelief. A time of death and grief.

We live in a time of tribulation. And yet, it is in the midst of this tribulation that our robes are washed clean by the blood of the Lamb. That the water of baptism cleanses us from all sin. That the Body and Blood of our Lord wraps us in a righteousness that is not our own.

And while we sit in the tribulation, we also sit at the throne of God. Serving him day and night. Not in a temple of stone or brick. But in the temple of our hearts, in the temple of our bodies, in the temple of our lives. Where God truly resides. Where he has set up his throne.

To be with us always. To shelter us with his presence through every adversity. So that while our bellies may hunger, our souls are satisfied. While our tongues may be dry, our thirst is quenched. While the sun beats down on us and makes us weary, we find rest in the shadow of His wings. For the Lamb is our shepherd. Guiding us through the valley of the shadow of death to springs of living water.

Guiding us to a new place. To a new home. One where all our needs – spiritual and physical – are met. An eternal home where hunger and thirst end for both body and soul. Where pain and suffering are no more. Where death itself is forgotten. And life is eternal.

We're not there, quite yet. Those sitting before the throne of God aren't there quite yet. There are still tears in this present age. There are still loved ones we miss. Family and friends and saints below who became saints above far sooner than we would have chosen.

Yet, God himself wipes our tears away. God himself comes to us this day in flesh and blood. And he says, *“Come. Eat at my table. Eat along side all those who went before you. Eat together as a holy Christian Church. As a communion of saints. For the forgiveness of your sins. For the resurrection of your body. Eat and know that both they above and you below have life everlasting.”*

Eat and know that the Church does not shrink. The Lord is steadfast in his promises. Faithful to his people. The Lord preserves his Church. In the Word that endures forever. In that food that nourishes to eternal life. The Lord is with us always. To the very end of the age. Amen.