

November 3, 2024 – Revelation 7:2-4, 9-17

How big is Immanuel Lutheran Church? Well, you can answer that in a number of different ways. For example, we could talk about the physical size of our worship space. Our sanctuary is roughly 3000 sq ft. It contains 32 pews. If you put 8 people shoulder-to-shoulder in each pew, it theoretically holds 256 congregants, although I'm sure that would feel pretty cramped. Ask someone from the community how big Immanuel Lutheran Church is and these are probably the numbers they will think of.

But there are other ways. We keep a running total of our communicant members. Right now, it's at 269. We also keep a running total of our baptized members. That's at 349. Despite these rather large numbers, last year we averaged an attendance of 70 people on Sunday morning. These are the kinds of numbers we report to the district to reflect the size of our congregation.

But there's a third way that we could talk about our size and it's one you may not have thought about. As best as I could determine, there have been 778 baptisms in Immanuel Lutheran Church over its entire history, give or take. Obviously, that doesn't include the baptisms of people who transferred in from other congregations, but it also does include the baptisms of people who transferred out to other congregations. So we'll call it a wash.

778... What purpose does that number serve? Well, I think it gives a decent impression of the size of our congregation from God's perspective. Because when God looks at our congregation, he doesn't just see the souls sitting in our pews this morning. He doesn't just see the baptized members on earth right now, some of whom are sitting at home or in a hospital or nursing home.

He sees hundreds and hundreds of people in heaven too. People who were baptized at our font. Communed at our altar. And buried by our pastors. He sees a lot more than those who are alive on earth. He sees those who are alive forevermore because they were baptized into Jesus Christ. He sees the saints of Immanuel Lutheran Church. All 778 of them, or whatever the number actually is.

Now, don't take this idea too far. I'm not saying that a saint from Immanuel is any different than a saint from Zion – Lone Elm or Trinity – Clark's Fork. Nor am I saying that we'll divide ourselves by congregations when we get to heaven. We are saints of God in Christ Jesus. The congregation we happen to belong to is purely an earthly matter.

My point really is simply to say that when we think about the church, we tend to leave out a big part of it. Because the saints in heaven are still part of the Church. They are worshipping before the throne of God, just as we are. They are praising God for his work of salvation, just as we are. They are serving God in their own way, just as we are. Their robes are made white in the blood of the lamb, just as ours are.

We are one. One body of Christ. One holy Christian and apostolic Church. One great communion of saints. We are a great multitude that no one could number and yet we are one. Because God – the Father, Son, Holy Spirit – has made us one, just as he is one.

And, in fact, we are not just one as a congregation. We are one with every church on earth. We are one with Zion – Lone Elm and with Trinity – Clark's Fork. We are one with the congregations of inner city St Louis and Kansas City, Chicago and Detroit. We are one with congregations struggling against atheism in Europe and Islam in Syria and paganism in Africa and communism in China.

We are one great multitude from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages. Brought together so that we may do one thing: stand before the throne of God and before the Lamb, and receive from him his salvation.

And I have to think St John had us in mind when he wrote down this great Revelation from the Lord. Because he knew that if the saints of God had struggled with issues of sexual immorality and false prophets and spiritual apathy in the past and if he knew that the congregations he was writing to right then were dealing with issues of sexual immorality and false prophets and spiritual apathy, then it was a near certainty that congregations in the future would be dealing with issues of sexual immorality and false prophets and spiritual apathy.

And so we are. We have a culture that is drowning in sexual immorality. We have churches led by false prophets promising health, wealth, and happiness. And we have a lot of Christians who are content to simply shrug their shoulders as their children grow up to believe whatever the world wants to teach them. Not a lot changed between ancient Israel and St John. Not a lot has changed between St John and us.

There are many things that change over time, but the sinfulness of this earth and its hatred of God's people is not one of them. As Jesus tells us in the Beatitudes today, "*Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven.*" "When others revile you." Not if. The world has always reviled, persecuted, and slandered the Church of God and it always will. And we have always struggled to remain focused on our future reward in the face of those challenges.

Which is, really, the purpose of the Book of Revelation. Many people read St John's Revelation and think it sounds terrifying. Because it's filled with stories of war and famine and plagues upon the earth. Great beasts rising out of the sea and horrible suffering across all mankind.

The truth is, though, that the Book of Revelation is only terrifying if you're standing in opposition to God's Church. It's no different than when the prophet Amos warned the unjust leaders of Israel that the day of the Lord would be a day of darkness and terror for them. Or when Isaiah warned the rebellious Israelites that the Lord would come to them in smoke, fire, and destruction. Yeah, God's judgement is terrifying.

But for the redeemed of God – for the saints of God, standing around his throne in robes washed by the blood of the Lamb – there is nothing terrifying about the end of days. It is, in fact, a message of hope and of joy. And this is what I was trying to communicate at the end of my sermon last week. We have every reason to live in the truth of God's Word.

And what God's Word tells us is that a day is coming when we will be sheltered with God's presence. When we will have neither hunger nor thirst nor any discomfort at all. For the Lamb of God who was slain will be our shepherd. He will guide us to green pastures where we have everything we need. Where springs of living water flow. And God himself will wipe away every tear from our eyes.

You may have noticed that there's a little election going on this week. I think there's a few minor offices on the ballot. Maybe a few inconsequential issues to vote on. I haven't really seen much about it, have you?

I'm joking... but only a little. The truth is that, in the grand scheme of things, they are minor offices. And the issues are inconsequential. Well... except, perhaps, for Amendment 3, which involves the actual life and death of souls who, if it passes, will never know the joy of being baptized into Christ's Church. And if you vote on nothing else, I encourage you to vote against that evil, evil piece of legislation.

But the rest? It's important and yet... it's not. It's important to our lives here and now. But in the grand scheme of eternity, it's barely blip on the radar. I can almost guarantee you that a day will come when you stand before the throne and before the Lamb, crying out, "*Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!*" And you won't care about the results of the 2024 election. It will be a long forgotten memory of an evil age that has passed away, in favor of something so much better.

No, our concern is exactly what I said a moment ago: the baptism of souls into Christ's Church. The washing of robes in the blood of the lamb. Our concern is the 349 people, still alive, who were baptized at our font and the 269 people who were confirmed at our altar, and why they aren't all here this morning. Our concern is the 778 people who have been baptized at Immanuel Lutheran Church and how we are going to make that number even greater.

Our concern is the multitude of saints who have come before us and the multitude of saints who will come after us. The multitude who came before who were faithful to God's Word and left it for us as a gift. And the multitude who come after who need us to be faithful to God's Word and leave it to them as a gift. Until that great day when all the servants of our God have been sealed on their foreheads with the water of Holy Baptism and the Lord makes all things new. Amen.