

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church  
Watertown, WI**

**“For All the Saints”**

Rev. David K. Groth

All Saints’ Day, 2001

“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” (Rev. 7:9).

If there’s any temptation on All Saints’ Day, it’s to think of the saints of God as plaster saints rather than flesh and blood human beings. They never knew doubt or weakness, never blurted out a foul word when they stubbed their toes. They never had a lascivious thought; their hearts were always on things above, not earthly things. Though we might acknowledge that saints exist today, we assume they’re not anywhere near Watertown. Maybe they’re comforting the dying in Calcutta, or confronting a drug lord in a slum of Rio de Janeiro, or even languishing in an Iranian prison. But they’re certainly not around here. Surely we would recognize them by their glow, their stained glass aura. Surely they’re nothing like us, not with our sin, which is foul; not with our faith which is riddled by doubt, not with our hearts that are self-centered and filthy. We’re nothing like the true saints, we think.

I’ve been reading a book by Mark Twain entitled “The Innocents Abroad.” In 1867 he was one of a group of Americans who chartered a ship and went on a long tour of Europe and the Holy Lands. Their first stop was a group of islands under the Portuguese flag known as the Azores. He toured a cathedral in a village called Fayal. It was rather run down and past its prime. Inside it was decorated with a “swarm of rusty, dusty, battered [saints] standing around the filigree work, some on one leg and some with one eye out but a gamey look in the other, and some with two or three fingers gone, and some with not enough nose left to blow – all of them crippled and discouraged, and fitter subjects for the hospital than the cathedral” (p. 22).

That actually is a far more accurate view of the saints than the one we carry around in our brains. The saints of God are crippled by defects, inside and out, and discouraged by failures. The saints of God were and are fully human, with all the flaws and weaknesses and sin that make us human. That is, not all the saints in heaven always looked like saints on earth. And yet their presence in heaven must mean sainthood is not about what they have done than what God has chosen to do for them. Their presence in heaven is a testament not to any hidden qualities they had, but to the surpassing grace and generosity of God in Christ Jesus.

In our text, John is given a vision of the church in heaven, the communion of saints. They’re clothed in white robes, holding palm branches in their hands. It’s a great multitude no one can number, as promised to Abraham: “as innumerable as the stars in the sky and the sand on the sea shore.” They are from everywhere. Every nation, tribe and language is represented. To our ears it sounds like a recipe for sectarian violence, or at least inter-synodical tensions. But there’s none of that there. With one voice they are all standing before the Lamb praising him. The angels and seraphim are also up there rumbling the rafters with their voices.

One of the elders asked John, “These clothed in white robes . . . who are they and from where have they come? John defers. “Sir, you know” he says. So the elder says, “These are the ones who have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.”

It’s interesting what the elder doesn’t say about them. He does not praise their fortitude. He does not wink and say these were the cream of the crop, you know. He does not say these were the obedient ones, or the tithers. He does not say these are the ones volunteered a lot of hours in the church and community and donated gallons of blood. He does not say these are the ones who know how to speak in tongues, or the ones who seasoned their speech with a lot of references to God, sort of like politicians who are thinking of making a run for president. These are not the Republicans or the Democrats, and there are certainly more of them than the Missouri and Wisconsin synods combined! “These are the ones who have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.” That’s how we become saints of God. That’s how we are made saints of God. Not by what we do, but rather by the washing of the blood of the Lamb.

Blood is red, yet the Lamb’s blood whitens. This blood, and nothing else in the universe whitens us so we may stand before God. They washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb. 1 John 1:7 says, “The blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin.”

Therefore, on this All Saint’s Day, let’s not remember just the official list of saints on the church’s calendar. Let’s remember also the foolish ones and the shy ones and the overbearing ones in our lives, the despots and crackpots of our lives. Let’s remember them all, warts and all, because their robes were washed in the blood, and because we loved them without knowing we loved them, and because, one way or another, they have been saints to us, through whom and by whom we were led Jesus. And let’s remember the Lamb, whose blood also washes us. Amen.

### **“Saints at Work”**

*“Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, ‘Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?’ I said to him, ‘Sir, you know.’ And he said to me, ‘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. ‘Therefore they are before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple . . .’” (Rev. 7:13).*

What will heaven be like? We all wonder about it. Our text gives us some clues, ten of them, in fact. Heaven will be all these things and much more than these things. But here are the ten clues given us in verses 15, 16 and 17. The saints are:

- 1) Before the throne of God.
- 2) They serve him day and night in his temple.
- 3) He that sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence.
- 4) They shall hunger no more
- 5) Neither thirst anymore;
- 6) The sun shall not strike them,
- 7) Nor any scorching heat.
- 8) Because the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd
- 9) And he will guide them to springs of living water,

10) And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.

Ten clues. Heaven is all these things and will certainly be more than these things. In any case, so far so good! According to this list heaven sounds like a decent place, far better than the alternative. I especially love the part about no scorching heat; that'll be nice.

But one thing in that list of ten doesn't sound all that great. It's the one that speaks of serving day and night in his temple. Putting that word "serve" next to "day and night" that doesn't sound good at all. In fact, with a little imagination that could describe hell better than heaven. Didn't Jesus say, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest"? Serving day and night in his temple does not sound like rest.

Maybe one of the things going on is our dim view of service. We think of it as something we have to do rather than something we get to do. And we think of leisure and idleness as the goal, sitting on a sunny beach with a cold drink, or having enough money that you no longer have to *serve* anyone.

In the year 540 a monk by the name of Benedict recognized this mentality within his monastery. It employed a number of servants who did the chores of cooking and cleaning so the monks could concentrate on prayer and study and worship. Benedict didn't like that at all, and so he wrote a new constitution for his monastery. The Rule of St. Benedict it's called. Releasing the servants from employment at the monastery, he insisted that part of the holy life, the sanctified life, is work. Each monk will have physical work to do – even (very wisely, I think), the old and the ailing, the physically ill and the mentally ill. Each will have work to do.

Maybe work isn't such a bad thing. Consider Genesis. In the beginning, God is not described as being idle, at leisure. No, he's at work . . . making things, creating things. And then Genesis turns to human work. "*The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and keep it*" (Gen. 2:15). Note: this is before they rebelled against God. This is no punishment. This is a good thing. Most of the art shows Adam and Eve with their fig leaves. It ought to show them at work, pruning, planting, harvesting. The wonderful garden will provide for their needs – one of which, apparently, is the need to be doing something, something productive? So paradise, at least in part, is having meaningful work to do.

Again, Luther can help us here. Before the Fall, Luther says, work would have been "play and joy." He muses about throwing seed on the ground and watching them burst and grow and bear fruit. He wonders out loud if babies might have been born already able to walk, and, like chickens hatching from eggs, able to find their own food without any effort from their parents. In any event, "It is appropriate to point out" Luther writes, "that man was created not for leisure but for work, *even in the state of innocence.*"

What we have left of the original play and joy are just faint traces and wretched remnants, he says. The reason, of course, is the Fall, which introduced the aspect of toil to work. For example, Luther writes, "The ground has been made utterly disagreeable by thorns, thistles, the sweat of the face, and endless vexation." And that's only about growing food. "How much difficulty, work, and inconvenience" Luther continues, "is [now] involved in bringing up a child!" Yet "Even now in this wretched state" there are faint traces of the former joys of work." He points out that the one who loves to garden does the sowing and the planting and digging with zeal and a certain pleasure. Again, these are just faint traces of life before the Fall.

Also, in heaven then, serving the Lord will be play and joy . . . not at all toilsome. I have no idea what that service will entail, but I know it will be fun, and meaningful, and rewarding. We won't want to stop. And it won't be for money. The primary motivation will be to say thank you, Lord. If heaven is anything, it is a place for which there is so much to give thanks that we will not possibly be able to stop giving thanks. We'll want to sing and praise and serve and work, and it will all be play and joy, without one bit of toil. In Luther's explanation to the 2<sup>nd</sup> article he writes, Jesus "redeemed me . . . that I may be His own and live under Him in His kingdom and *serve* Him" [there's that word serve again] "serve him in *everlasting* righteousness, innocence, and blessedness." Service without end.

One last point, and this is important: There's no good reason . . . no good reason to wait until we get to heaven before we serving on earth. First, your neighbors need your service. Look around. Your city needs your service. Your church too . . . and the world. Second, there is much for which to give thanks and little time on earth to do. Christ has already died for you. You have already been baptized. Therefore, out of thanksgiving, we serve. That word "therefore" is also in our text. Verse 15: "Their robes have been made white in the blood of the Lamb. **Therefore**, they serve him day and night in his temple."

Your robes have been made white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore, it's time to serve, with joy and thanksgiving. Amen.