

November 3, 2024
All Saints Day (Observed)
St. Timothy Lutheran Church – Huber Heights, OH
Pastor Joel Sutton

Revelation 7:9–17

OUT OF THE GREAT TRIBULATION.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

The great **tribulation**! The antichrist is knocking at the door! And it all will reach its climax in this Tuesday's election. That's what all the political pundits and prognosticators have been telling you over the last several months. Right? And of course, if it were not true, they wouldn't report it. Perhaps you believe that if your candidate doesn't win the election – it's the end of democracy. It'll be the end of the United States. A psychologist has even coined the term "election stress disorder" to describe the level of anxiety and obsession that many Americans are feeling in this polarizing political climate. (cf: <https://news.vumc.org/2024/10/28/yes-election-stress-disorder-is-a-thing-here-are-some-ways-to-deal-with-it/>)

In all your anxiety, stress, and trepidation, just remember, which ever candidate is named President of the United States after this election, Christ Jesus is still King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Your Triune God is in charge. The American President and every other world ruler have no authority unless it has been granted by the will of God. (cf: John 19:11) The psalmist proclaims:

"3 Put not your trust in princes, in a son of man, in whom there is no salvation." (Psalm 146:3)

"8 Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth." (Psalm 124:8)

For the Christian, **suffering** and **tribulation** are part of the cost of discipleship. It's the cost of taking up your cross and following Jesus. (cf: Matthew 16:24) The holy Christian Church on earth has always faced **suffering** and **tribulation**. After St. Paul was stoned nearly to death at Lystra, St. Luke records that Paul strengthened the souls of those First Century Christians:

"... encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God." (Acts 14:22)

Today we celebrate **the Feast of All Saints Day**, remembering those **saints** who have gone out of the **great tribulation** and are in heaven – but also encouraging you dear **saints** who are still experiencing the **great tribulation** here on earth. (cf: Revelation 7:14) Make no mistake, we neither pray to nor worship those **saints** who have died and whose souls are in heaven. We remember the **saints** who died in Christ because of their faithful witness to the true faith – that is faith in Jesus Christ the one and only Savior this world will ever know. God used all those **saints** to make a difference in our lives.

The word *saint* literally means: “*dedicated to God, holy, sacred.*” (cf: BDAG, 10) In short, to be a *saint* is to be set apart and belong to God, dedicated for His service. That means that every Christian, alive or dead, is considered a *saint*. It’s not because of the virtuous and holy life that they currently live or have lived – but it’s on account of the virtuous and holy life, death, and resurrection of Christ Jesus which is imputed to sinners such as you and me in baptismal waters.

Yes, you baptized believer, even though you are a sinner, you are still one of God’s *saints*. It’s not because of anything you have done – but it’s on account of Christ’s work of salvation on your behalf. It is not your work but a work of Christ. St Paul writes:

“... *Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her,* ²⁶ *that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word,* ²⁷ *so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.*” (Ephesians 5:25–27)

St. Paul uses similar *washing* imagery in his letter to Titus where he writes:

“⁵ [God] *saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit,*” (Titus 3:5)

St. John also uses *washing* imagery in our first reading this morning where he is writing about a revelation given to him by Christ Jesus, from God, to show us Christians what things that will soon take place. (cf: Revelation 1:1–2) What God revealed to John in a vision, he records in complex symbolic imagery. As Lutheran Christians, when we read the Holy Spirit inspired imagery written in Revelation, we take it *metaphorically*, not *literally*. (cf: Brighton, Revelation, Concordia Commentary, 24–25)

Unfortunately, some interpreters today attempt to read Revelation literally, as a series of end-times events that happen one after the other. Because of this, many mistakenly believe that Christ will return to take all Christians out of the world and leave the unbelievers behind to *suffer tribulation* until He returns again to begin a 1,000-year reign. And then, on the Last Day He will return again for the final judgment. (cf: Engelbrecht, The Lutheran Study Bible, 2197–2198)

But as Lutheran Christians, believe that Scripture teaches that the reign and rule of Christ on earth began at Jesus’ Baptism in the Jordan River. (cf: Gibbs, Matthew 1:1–11:1, Concordia Commentary, 47–49) It also teaches that Christ will return again, only once, at His second coming on the Last Day. (cf: Matthew 25:31–46; John 5:28–29; Acts 24:15; 1 Thessalonians 4:13–15; Revelation 1:7; 20:11–15) As we confess in the Nicene and Apostles’ Creeds, Christ is seated at the right hand of God the Father and on the Last Day He will raise both believers and unbelievers from the dead for the final judgment.

All you have to do is look at your life and your circumstances and you know that you are living in *tribulation*. As I said earlier, every Christian experiences *tribulation: suffering*, pain, the death of loved ones, and the testing of your faith. Each of these *tribulations* points to the future *great tribulation* at the very End on the Last Day. But for the you, each particular moment of your *suffering* is your *great tribulation*. (cf: Revelation, Concordia Commentary, Brighton, 199)

And as one of God's *saints*, because of the sacrificial death of the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, God rescues you, His *saints*, out of the ***Great Tribulation***.

All who have died with lifesaving faith in Christ are His *saints* living in the ***Church Triumphant*** in the eternal presence of Christ. These *saints* have died and rest from their labors in heaven. These include your believing loved ones who have already died in Christ. They are a host arrayed in white robes, washed in the blood of the Lamb standing before the throne of God. You and me and all baptized and redeemed *saints* of God who're still alive and living in this ***great tribulation*** are members of the ***Church Militant***. We eagerly await the second coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Throughout the book of Revelation, John describes both of these realities: the ***Church Militant*** and the ***Church Triumphant***. He describes both, the terrifying *sufferings* of Christians on earth, and the eternal reign of Christ Jesus as Lord exalted in heavenly glory. As John describes these two realities, God's people on earth are encouraged to cling the Father's promises in Christ Jesus. In faith, grasp hold to the eternal glory that awaits you for the sake of Christ. God's promises strengthens and encourages you and me and all believers to share the redeeming Good News of Christ crucified to save sinners in our daily stations of life so that the Holy Spirit might bring others to faith in Christ.

John didn't illustrate the earthly trials and *tribulations* to cause you to despair – but to prepare you of the realities that all Christians will face. They serve as a warning, so that you guard against the temptations of the devil, the world, and your sinful flesh – and so that you trust in Christ Jesus who has defeated sin, death, and the devil. John includes them so that you cling to your baptismal promises, that you are safe and secure within the Holy Ark of Christ's Church, with Christ Himself as the cornerstone. (cf: Ephesians 2:19–20) The gates of hell will not prevail against it. (cf: Matthew 16:18)

To be sure, sharing the Good News of salvation in Christ many times, brings persecution and *tribulation*. Maybe not persecuted to the point of martyrdom, but you will be reviled, and people will utter all kinds of evil against you. But as Jesus says in our Gospel lesson:

“Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” (Matthew 5:12)

Just as our Lord has taken those *saints* we name this morning in the Prayers of the Church out of the ***Great Tribulation***, so too, will He come for you. In our text, John describes the *saints*, with sins forgiven by the blood of Christ, clothed in the righteousness of the Lamb. The Lamb presents them to the heavenly Father. The multitude stands pure and holy in the presence of God and the Lamb:

“and cry... out with a loud voice, ‘Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!’” (Revelation 7:10)

Indeed:

“These are the ones [that God has rescued]... out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.”
(Revelation 7:14)

The language in our text sounds like it is the *saints* who do the washing of their robes. But as we heard from St Paul earlier, it is Christ who does the cleansing by the washing of water with the Word. He alone presents His *saints* to Himself holy and without blemish. Salvation is by grace alone. It is impossible for you to wash yourself or your robe and achieve righteousness. Prior to your washing you were spiritually dead and unholy. Christian holiness is not a moral quality or something you can earn. Christian holiness is received for the sake of Christ. God alone can turn scarlet sins as white as snow. (cf: Isaiah 1:18)

That's why God sent His only begotten Son into the world; to rescue sinners from sin and eternal death, and to build His Church on earth. (cf: Matthew 16:18) He was crucified and died – for you! Risen from the dead and ascended into heaven, He is seated at the right hand of God, but He still reigns among His people today through the holy ark of His Church on earth in Word and Sacrament.

In St John's first epistle letter he writes:

“See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are.” (1 John 3:1)

Dear children of God, you are His *saints*. He has called you His own child and set you apart in Baptism, dedicating you for His service, through *suffering*, trials, and *tribulation*. What kind of service?

“¹⁰ For [you] are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that [you] should walk in them.” (Ephesians 2:10)

As you continue to abide with the Lamb in repentance and faith, your robe is continually washed and made white in the blood of the Lamb by means of Word and Sacrament. Clinging to your baptismal promises, you are safe and secure withing the Ark of Christ's Church, with Christ Himself as the cornerstone. (cf: Ephesians 2:19–20) The gates of hell will not prevail against it. (cf: Matthew 16:18)

Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understand, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus,
Amen.