

I John 3:1-3; Revelation 7:9-17

All Saints' Day

November 1, 2020—Shepherd of the Mountains, Pinetop, AZ

INI

“Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?” Through John’s symbolic language we see the full number of God’s people of old, from each of the twelve tribes of Israel in the preceding verses. Twelve tribes times twelve—all of them. And then times ten times ten times ten—really, absolutely, completely, all of the full number of those who believed in God’s promises of old to redeem His people from their sins by His grace through the coming Messiah. The full number of all who put their faith hope and trust in God’s promise going back to the Garden of Eden when the “protoevangelium,” the *first Gospel* was proclaimed to Adam and Eve.

And the Apostle John could have been an infomercial personality because “but wait, there’s more!” **“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, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands.”**

Who are these? Where did they come from?

Well we see that they are the saints. But with such a great multitude from God’s chosen people of old and those chosen now in Christ, who are they? Can we pick any one out from the crowd? If you look in one direction you might see St. Paul, Apostle of the Lord. And off in the distance, that might be St. Noah and St. Isaiah standing next to St. Ruth and St. Elizabeth. It’s hard to tell because they are so far away. And is that Father Abraham over there?

If you and I could look in on this scene with our own eyes right now, it might look like a sort of cosmic “Where’s Waldo” scene. Can you find this one? Can you find that one? It’s even harder because they are all wearing white. And to find them you first need to know who to look for. So think for just a second about how many saints you could name off the top of your head. Some of them should be pretty easy. We’ve got the apostles for sure. There are many prophets of old. There are the biblical patriarchs. Make sure you also count those notable women of faith in scripture.

And then there are some lesser known names. And by lesser known, I mean to the world’s accounting of history. They may not appear in historical books, but they are listed in scripture. They are present in this scene, even if not named specifically.

Jack. Gordon. Ewald. _____ These are some of the people we have known and loved who have died in the faith. Are they not *also* saints before the throne of the Lamb?

And what about those extremely rarely known saints? You know the ones whose names make us uncomfortable. What about St. Jeffrey Dahmer? A pastor was willing to bring to even him the message of salvation in Jesus. And by many accounts he came to know Jesus before he died. But the thought of people like him in heaven makes us cringe. So what does it take to be one of the saints?

Saint: Noun: “A person acknowledged as holy or virtuous and typically regarded as being in heaven after death; a very virtuous, kind, or patient person”

From Wikipedia: “A saint is a person who is recognized as having an exceptional degree of holiness or likeness or closeness to God.”

Do those descriptions fit for someone who in this life was guilty of multiple murders? To be honest, do those descriptions *perfectly* describe any of the other names mentioned, the names of our lost loved ones? And do they describe you and me?

The hard pill to swallow, the difficult answer is “no.”

So, what makes one a saint? Is it leading a perfect life? At the close of the chapter in which we just heard Jesus give the Beatitudes, He says, **“You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”** ^{Matthew 5:48} *Well that’s not so bad. We’ll just stop sinning then! Unfortunately, it’s too late. 50 years of perfect living (as if that were possible) doesn’t negate the first 30 years of sinful living. And it doesn’t negate the original sin we were born with. You see, we aren’t sinners because we sin. We sin because we are sinners. It’s our nature, our default setting. And we keep running against those pesky 10 Commandments.*

What about performing a certain number of miracles? Some say that is what makes a person a saint. Many of us can boast that, usually without falling, we can walk on water...if it's frozen...and thick enough. Does that count? Some of us also could probably cure a ham. How about that? No? I guess that other requirement of perfection keeps us knocked down and put in our places.

The Apostle Paul, St. Paul, in Romans 3 quotes the OT in saying "None is righteous, no, not one." And yet Paul also writes:

To all those in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Romans 1:7

To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours: ⁵ Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. 1 Corinthians 1:2

To the church of God that is at Corinth, with all the saints... 2 Corinthians 1:1

To the saints who are in Ephesus, and are faithful in Christ Jesus... Ephesians 1:1

To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi... Philippians 1:1

To the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae... Colossians 1:2

So how are they all saints? If no one is righteous. If no one seeks God, let alone come close to God.

What makes a saint?

St. John tells us in his gospel account. John 13:1 "Now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end." And we know the end—the end of the week. Suffering. Blood. Crucifixion. Death. The end of the story—a resurrection.

And again, from St. John, in his first epistle. "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." 1 John 1:8-9 We said those words this morning leading up to our Confession and Absolution. "If we confess our sins..." If we admit that we are *not* saints. If we admit that we are dirty, filthy, stinking sinners, what does God do? He cleanses us from all unrighteousness.

Who are these? Who are the saints? "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."

All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. No one, not even our dearest departed loved ones, not even our heroes of the faith, not even the best among us here today makes the cut. But then Christ comes along. He says, "this is one for whom I died. This one believed in me. This one trusted in My promises and MY righteousness. This one has been covered by My blood and made clean. This is one for whom I rose from death. This is one of My saints. Come with me, little one. Enter into the kingdom of My Father."

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ, what makes you any different from those who already stand before the throne of God? Not a whole lot, except for a little timing, and a little perspective. There's no need to clean up their lives and ignore the dirt of sin as we remember them. There's no need to pretend they were perfect or that their lives were so great. Our beloved saints of old and saints of recent memory have already endured the tribulation of temptation and trial on earth. And in faith, they received the salvation of the Lord. And for that they now sing His praises.

You and I are still enduring the tribulation of trial and temptation. We are waiting along with the saints the resurrection of all flesh. And yet, while we still wait, we are God's saints. We also have been declared righteous because of the faith worked in us by the Word and Holy Spirit, faith in Christ. And we also have been washed clean in the blood of the Lamb.

Sr. John tells us. "Beloved, we *are* God's children now, and what we *will be* has *not yet* appeared; but we know that *when* He appears we shall be like Him, because we shall see Him as He is."

As we await that glorious day, we children of God continue to hunger and thirst for His righteousness, continue to receive and be strengthened by His Word and Sacraments, and we join here on earth all the other saints who now rest in heaven from their labors in praising the Lamb and giving Him thanks for the salvation He has won and is giving to us. Amen.