**St. Paul’s Lutheran Church
Wildwood, Missouri**

**All Saints Day**

**Revelation 7: 2-17**

**November 1, 2020**

As most of you know, our children were all born pretty much right on top of each other. If you are Irish, you refer to them as, “*Irish Triplets!”* The problem with that, however, is that basically all being the same age, they all got married within a year of each other. So back in 2013 and 2014, our lives were filled with weddings . . . much to the detriment of my wallet!

 That said though, as busy as it was, I have to admit, family weddings are fun. To a great extent, they are like a great family reunion where you see people that you haven’t seen in, perhaps, years. And there is always the obligatory commemoration of that reunion when all the extended family gathers around the bride and the groom to take the family picture. Actually, two family pictures: one for the bride’s side and one for the groom’s.

 Now, I am not much for being in photographs but I love being a part of these typically huge, somewhat unorganized and often difficult to take pictures because, when you look back at them, they usually reflect everyone sharing a day of joy. We get the opportunity to just put the reality of life and its worries away for a few hours and just enjoy being in the company of those we love the most and that is worth a photo for posterity.

 In our reading for today from Revelation for this All Saints Day, St. John, in a way, also gives us two family photographs. He begins with showing us a photograph of our church family here on earth. That is the 144,000 he mentions and we like to call it the church militant. He follows that by showing us the great multitude standing before the Lamb, our Lord Jesus, in heaven. That is the church triumphant. They are two family photographs, considerably different, but when combined offer each and every Christian the great hope that comes from Christ our Savior. Let’s take a closer look at them, but I want to look at his second picture first.

In the second photograph, if you will permit me to mix metaphors a bit, John starts off by painting a pretty spectacular picture of what awaits all who believe and trust in the blood of Jesus Christ for their salvation. This is a photograph of our future family. The language of Revelation, because it is what is called *“apocalyptic language,”* is characteristically over the top. We do not just see a crowd of people gathered before the throne of God, but we see “*a great multitude,”* so big that *“no one could count it.”* We do not just see a group of believers, but we see believers from *“every nation, tribe, people and language.”* This great multitude is not just wearing white robes, they are wearing gleaming white robes. It is a scene of unimaginable joy as all the believers from all four corners of the world are gathered before the throne of God in heaven, celebrating the salvation that he has won for them through the Lamb who was slain, our Lord Jesus Christ. This is the family gathering that God has planned; that great reunion of all of our brothers and sisters in Christ, some of whom you and I have not even met yet, but, we are related.

But, don’t we expect that of heaven? Don’t we expect to find other believers? Of course, we do. I hope to see every single one of you in heaven with me. Don’t we expect to find angels? Absolutely, and the first one I’m going to look up is Gabriel. I want to know what it was like to announce to Mary that she would give birth to Jesus. Don’t we expect to find praises being sung and, don’t we expect to find both God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ? Of course, we do. That is what heaven is.

 Now, don’t get me wrong. I am not disappointed by that at all. To be in the presence of almighty God and to see Jesus face to face will be an experience beyond imagination. To sit at his feet, to touch his hands which were pierced for my transgression, in and of itself, makes me anxious for my future. However, John leaves out something in this photograph of our future and it is an important omission. Do you see what it is? Well, if you don’t, I’ll tell you what is missing. What is missing is everything bad. There is nothing “*bad”* in John’s family portrait. Our future, your future and my future hold nothing bad and believe me, that is good and it is good because we have experienced plenty of bad in this world.

And this is what the first family photograph is all about. Yes, it is an encouraging photograph in that it shows us God’s efforts to protect his family here on earth. However, the fact that he offers us protection means that there are things from which we need protecting. And that is a fact of life for the family of God here on earth. While there is certainly much joy living as a Christian in this world, it does present for us some difficulties. While John shows us that someday we will live with nothing bad, this world, from the very beginning has seen its fair share of *“bad.”* Just think for a moment about all that sin has wrought in our world. First, it separated us from God with the result that now all people are born enemies of God. Sin placed every man, woman and child ever born under God’s judgment. Second, it has caused endless turmoil and strife in our relationship with our fellow human beings. History is filled with examples of man’s inhumanity to man. Cain killed his brother Able. The men of Sodom and Gomorrah wanted to molest God’s angels. King David’s son Absalom tried to overthrow his father. Men took Jesus, their creator, beat him and nailed him to a cross.

Since Jesus’ crucifixion, evil has simply continued as we have seen ruler after ruler make war and slaughter innocent people. At the time of John’s writing *Revelation*, Christians were facing persecution under Emperor Nero. He used to take Christians, soak them in oil, tie them to posts and light them as torches to illuminate his garden at night. Muhammed spread his so-called “*religion of peace*” via the sword, threatening all those he conquered with death unless they converted to Islam. Hitler killed six million Jews. Stalin killed ten million of his own citizens and Saddam Hussein routinely used inhumane and unimaginable torture on his own people for no other reason than to strike terror in their hearts.

The family picture of the church militant is one that shows the signs of tribulation. And that is what the church militant endures: tribulation. Actually, John is very specific about this. Looking at the family of God dressed in white robes, the angel tells John, “*These are they who have come out of the great tribulation.”*

Many in Christendom totally misinterpret what the tribulation is. They think of it only as a relatively short period of time of great persecution just before Jesus returns. That is not the case. The great tribulation is simply life here on this broken planet we call Earth. Evil and bad stuff shave always surrounded the church. What generation of Christians has ever escaped living in a sinful world? Not one! We are touched by it on a daily basis. We see poverty and crime, sickness and disease, graft and theft, starvation and hunger, murder and war. We see school shootings with children murdering their classmates and their teachers. We see thousands gather outside the Illinois Statehouse and demand the legalization of same sex marriage. And, of course, we see death, the greatest evil we face. Every time you drive by a cemetery, we see what evil and sin have wrought. We see the destiny of sin.

But, worse yet, I believe, if we are honest, we see evil in our own hearts. This may be a theme that I hit fairly often in my sermons, but it is imperative that we are more troubled by our own sin than the sin in the world around us. As Christians, we should be tired of having sinful thoughts. We should be disgusted with our own sin. Personally, I want to be rid of anger, hatred, frustration, self-centeredness, greediness and the whole myriad of sin which persists in my heart. I don’t want to worry anymore. I don’t want to worry about my family, my children and what the world will be like for them. I want to be free, finally and for good, from all that is bad. Don’t you long for the day when you will wake up and experience nothing but peace? Don’t you long for the day when your face becomes part of the photograph John describes? Don’t you long for the day when you can join the rest of your family and have your picture taken with all those you love the most? I do. I normally don’t like having my picture taken but this is one that I will gladly standup so that I can be front and center!

Being part of that family photo is what awaits all of us by the grace of God. In this past year, some of those we love from this congregation or who were dear to this congregation have already become part of that photo. Virginia Ross, Willard Starck, Rosemary Goehri, Don Lewis, Mark Sontag, Linda Gregory, Donna Schaeg, Brenda Schaeg and most recently, Dolores Balleydier, have already taken their position in the front row before the throne of God and they are simply waiting for us to squeeze in next to them. And the good news is that we will squeeze in next to them

We all, along with the rest of the church of Jesus Christ, will come out of this great tribulation. We will come out of this troubled and sinful world and stand before our Lord God in perfect holiness with no semblance of bad or evil upon us. Why? We will be wearing robes of righteousness, made white and pure by the blood of the Lamb. That is why this vision of heaven awaits us. Jesus is the reason for our future. You and I have been washed in his blood, we have been cleansed in Baptism, made pure and holy so that our future holds forth nothing evil, but only good. You see, Jesus took all that evil with him to the cross. All evil was punished on that Good Friday two thousand years ago and he triumphed over it paving the way for only good to remain for those who believe.

Because of Jesus we are part of the family of God! You and I, together with the rest of our brothers and sisters everywhere, will come before God’s throne of grace. He will spread his tent over us, protecting us and bringing us into his care. In our future, by God’s word of promise clear, and because of Jesus we will never hunger or thirst. He will take care of all of needs. And Jesus, the Lamb who was slain, will, in a mixing of metaphors, Shepherd us for all eternity and, best of all, he will wipe away every tear from our eyes. There will be no room for tears in our future for there will be a complete absence of anything that would cause us to cry. No sin. No evil. No death. This will only be a happy picture. To God be the praise, and the glory and the wisdom and the thanks and the honor and the power and the strength for ever and ever. In Jesus’ name. Amen.