

The Festival of All Saints

Revelation 7:9-17: "Behold a Host, Arrayed in White."

Oct. 31/Nov. 1, 2020 | Saude, Jerico, & Redeemer Lutheran Churches

In Nomine Iesu

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Every year when we observe All Saints' Day, we have the custom of singing one hymn in particular. The hymn is about 250 years old, and for many years you could count on singing it at funerals in Norwegian Lutheran churches. This hymn is "Behold a Host, Arrayed in White," and we will sing it again today. The first stanza of the hymn is based on the first part of today's Epistle lesson from Revelation 7. Here the apostle John describes what he saw in his vision of heaven:

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, and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen."

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." (ESV)

Now in these days of social distancing and small crowds, it seems strange to see old video footage of football stadiums and concert halls full of people. The same thought might have struck you when you heard about the "*great multitude [in heaven] that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages.*" What a glorious scene! Unlike the Tower of Babel when the peoples were divided and moved away from each other, now God's people from all over the world and all across time are brought together.

There are no enemies in this great multitude, no cultural or language barriers, no socio-economic differences. These people are one, both regarding their status before God and their purpose in His presence. This oneness is emphasized by their common clothing. They are dressed in flowing white robes, perfectly clean. One of the elders in heaven explained to John how the robes got so uniformly white. He said, "*They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.*"

Now that is the strangest bleach we've ever heard of! How could blood ever make clothing whiter? Because it is not just any blood, it is "*the blood of the Lamb.*" This refers to the fact that no

sin stains the believers in heaven. They stand pure and holy before God because Jesus shed His blood to wash away their sins.

This is why they now sing joyfully *“before the throne and before the Lamb.”* They hold palm branches in their hands like the crowd that greeted Jesus on Palm Sunday. On that occasion the people cried, *“Hosanna!” – “Save us, we pray!”* And now the saints rejoice in the salvation won for them by crying out with a loud voice, *“Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!”*

They sing together one song with one voice, the only song worth singing. They sing the song of their salvation through the God-Man Jesus. He is the Lamb enthroned in heaven. He has won the victory for them over sin, devil, and death. By faith in Him, these saints have now been translated from the troubles of the world to the glories of heaven. They have come out of *“the great tribulation,”* and now join the angels and the elders and the four living creatures in the praise and worship of their Lord.

We sing the first stanza of hymn #553, which tells us about this *“host, arrayed in white,”* who *“in the flood of Jesus’ blood / Are cleansed from guilt and blame.”*

1. Behold a host, arrayed in white,
Like thousand snow-clad mountains bright;
With palms they stand. Who is this band
Before the throne of light?
Lo, these are they, of glorious fame,
Who from the great affliction came
And in the flood of Jesus’ blood
Are cleansed from guilt and blame.
Now gathered in the holy place,
Their voices they in worship raise;
Their anthems swell where God doth dwell
Mid angels’ songs of praise.

We wish we could be there with the saints and angels in heaven, or at least get a temporary taste of their joy. The elder speaking to John explains what the saints have now that they are in God’s eternal presence:

“Therefore they are before the throne of God, and serve Him day and night in His temple; and He who sits on the throne will shelter them with His presence. They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and He will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

Here the contrast between heaven and earth is described. In heaven there is no more hunger or thirst. No one is overcome by weariness or weakness. No harm is done by the sun and scorching heat. The sheep are not without a shepherd. No tears fill their eyes.

But the opposite is true on earth. On earth there is trouble, pain, sorrow. “[A]ll tribes and peoples and languages” are not united here. Here there is division—sometimes deep division—within the same community and even the same house. Instead of loving their neighbor as themselves, many decide to just love themselves. They view any challenge to the way they think as a great offense. Those who do not share their ideas are the enemy, who do not deserve to be treated with respect. We see these attitudes so clearly in our tense social environment.

And we are just as guilty of these divisions and troubles as others are. We have hated our enemies and cursed those who persecute us, when Jesus tells us to love them and pray for them (Mat. 5:44). Often our hardships on earth are self-inflicted. Because of our sin we bring trouble and pain on ourselves.

But other things happen simply because we live in a fallen world. Sometimes we get sick or injured. Eventually we will die. It may not be your own death that causes you the most anguish. It may be the death of a loved one, or even just the thought of having to live without someone you rely on for so many things.

We feel powerless in the face of death. We do not control who it strikes or when. It has always been this way since the fall into sin, but we are perhaps more aware of it this year than in years past. No matter what we do, no matter what measures we take, we cannot escape death.

But there is still hope! There is one who entered death and emerged from it again. A Lamb was snatched by the great jaws of death—easy prey, easy victory! But no! This was no ordinary Lamb. It was the Lamb of God. Jesus died in your place, so that death could not hold you in its terrible jaws. It is true that you will die, unless Jesus returns before it happens. But you will not stay dead. You will rise again. Your Savior will come and call you forth with a shout, and you will rise up to Him with glorified body clothed in the white robe of His righteousness.

That is your comfort today as you remember all who have gone on before you, whether parents or grandparents or siblings or children or friends. You will see the faithful departed again, and “*God will wipe away every tear from [your] eyes.*” We sing stanza two of the hymn:

2. Despised and scorned, they sojourned here;
But now, how glorious they appear!
Those martyrs stand, a priestly band,
God’s throne forever near.
So oft in troubled days gone by,
In anguish they would weep and sigh;
At home above the God of love
For aye their tears shall dry.
They now enjoy their Sabbath rest,
The paschal banquet of the blest;
The Lamb, their Lord, at festal board
Himself is host and guest.

God wanted John to write down what he saw in heaven so you and all believers would be comforted. He knows what trials and troubles you face here on earth. He knows how easy it is

to become disheartened by the wickedness and sin you see all around you and that you also find inside yourself. He promises that these struggles are only temporary, while the bliss of heaven is forever.

In this text from Revelation, the Lord gives you a glimpse of the life to come. He shows you that you will not be alone in heaven but will be surrounded by a great multitude that cannot be numbered. That means you are not alone here on earth either because there are many around the world who confess Jesus as their Savior from sin.

While you are here, God calls you to stay close to Him by hearing His Word and partaking of His Sacraments. These are the means by which He strengthens you and keeps you steadfast in the faith. He also gives you the courage to let the light of His truth shine in your life, *“so that [others] may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven”* (Mat. 5:16).

You won't carry out these callings of God perfectly. You are still a sinner. Sometimes you will only stumble along, and sometimes you will fall—hardly the picture of a holy child of God. But the blood of the Lamb was poured out for all of your sins. All of your wicked thoughts, all of your self-inflicted wounds, all your doubts—all of them are forgiven by the merciful God. You can meet death and the grave with confidence knowing that nothing stands between you and God's grace. You are reconciled to God the Father because of the perfect life and the holy death of His only-begotten Son.

When you hear John's account of the saints in heaven and when you sing today's hymn, picture yourself among that great **Host, Arrayed in White**. Look forward with confidence and joy to the day when you will join that holy choir, holding palm branches, gathered around the throne of the holy God. You will be numbered with those saints because you have been washed in the blood of the Lamb. Your place in heaven is reserved, where you will sing the song of salvation for all eternity. We join together in the third stanza of the hymn:

3. Then hail! ye mighty legions, yea,
All hail! now safe and blest for aye;
And praise the Lord, who with His Word
Sustained you on the way.
Ye did the joys of earth distain,
Ye toiled and sowed in tears and pain;
Farewell, now bring your sheaves and sing
Salvation's glad refrain.
Swing high your palms, lift up your song,
Yea, make it myriad voices strong:
Eternally shall praise to Thee,
God, and the Lamb belong.

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