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Title: For All The Saints

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Text: [Revelation 7:9-17](#)

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[Watch Service](#)



Today is All Saints Sunday in the life of the church. That means we remember those members of our congregation who have died since last year's All Saints Sunday, and we remember those in our lives who influenced us and have gone before us. All Saints DAY or All Hallows Day (as in what we prayed in the Lord's Prayer—"Hallowed be thy name") was actually last Wednesday, November 1st. It follows October 31st or All Hallows Eve or what has come to be known as Halloween.

What makes All Saints' Day special is that it's not just about the specific saints that we often associate with religious history—Paul, Mother Theresa, Mary, Peter. Rather, this is a day to remember ALL saints—the people who have gone before us in this place and in our lives, those whose voices still speak and whose encouragement keep us going when we don't want to. I remember my mom and dad, my grandparents, and mentors and so many others. I remember Ruth's parents. Even looking at the list before you, my life would be very different without each and every one of them.

Author Joyce Landorf Heatherley calls them "Balcony People." Balcony People may be gone, but by God's grace they are still rooting for us. Imagine the key people from your earliest years, applauding you from the upper row of the "balcony" while you remain on the stage, playing out the drama of your life. All Saints Sunday is our annual reminder to do what we can do every day; thank God for those who have poured their time, their energy, and their kindness into our lives; and resolve that we will not fail to do the same for the next generation.

When we hear the word saint, we don't usually think of people that we know. We're more used to the way the Catholic tradition or the Greek Orthodox Christian community talks about it. Different saints have different roles. Saint Valentine is the patron saint of love; Saint Jude is the patron saint of lost causes; some folks believe that if you bury a statue of Joseph, the carpenter, upside down in your yard, he will help you sell your house. I've never understood why he must be upside down.

The Bible gives a different message. It says that everyone in the community of faith is a saint. It also says you're a sinner, but that doesn't take away from your role as a saint. Every one of you is a saint. Do you believe it? I can see that many of you look skeptical; maybe you're more skeptical about the person next

to you than you are about yourself. You are a saint. Saint means someone that has been set apart in this world to help do God's work. You are a saint because you can reflect God's love to someone in this world. You can tell the truth, spread kindness, advocate for justice, and help others to stand up for themselves. You can do a good thing, even if you have done bad things.

Pastor David Clark tells the story of a woman on his search committee asking him a question wanting to know how he handled funerals because, she said, "If I have to go to one more funeral where they make some rascal sound like a saint, I'm going to attack the preacher." A few months later her husband died, and apparently, he was something of a rascal himself, a retired veterinarian who loved motorcycles and lived a carefree life. The funeral had an open mic time—which by the way, is about the only thing that I will push hard against at a funeral. It is a time where people are invited to share a thought or memory in an unscripted way, and you never know what you'll get. As Pastor Clark tells the story, they got to the open mic portion of Virgil's funeral, and a woman stood up and said, "None of you know me, and none of you knew Virgil like I knew him, but there is something you should know." Everyone held their breath about what she was about to say.

She explained that she was a waitress at Famous Dave's where Virgil hung out with his friends once a week. After a while, she said that they developed a "relationship." But it turns out that it wasn't the kind of relationship anyone assumed. He was interested in her school work and wanted her to succeed. He encouraged her, tipped far too generously, and even helped her with some of her assignments. She was able to graduate and could now fully support her two children. No one had any idea. Despite all the rascally things about Virgil, he was capable of this beautiful anonymous act. Saint Virgil. If Virgil can make it, so can you. Like Virgil, we are all simultaneously saint and sinner.

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Today we remember all the saints and sinners who have been part of our lives. Our reading from Revelation is one of the few pieces of scripture that talks about a vision of people who have gone to heaven. The literary style of Revelation is a cross between apocalyptic literature—meaning it speaks about the end of time—and a letter. We are familiar with letters in the New Testament because Paul wrote lots of them, and we just finished looking at Romans. John, in Revelation, is on the island of Patmos and is writing to seven different churches. The first three chapters are individualized messages to each one of these churches, so in that way, it's like a letter. A letter to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea.

We are not as familiar with apocalyptic literature. In the Bible, there are only two books—Revelation and Daniel—that fit this genre of literature. There is lots of what we would consider bizarre imagery in Revelation. That's a hallmark of this kind of literature, and first century people would have been comfortable with and knowledgeable of this kind of writing. As I said when we studied Revelation at the start of 2023, it would be wrong to try to understand Revelation, or apocalyptic writing in general, literally. You will only tie yourself in knots when you try to force John's apocalyptic understanding into a modern chronological framework. That means that you shouldn't try to interpret current events, like the war in the Middle East into something that Revelation saw coming. That will only frustrate you and force you to lose sight of the message of the comfort and peace that our passage for today offers us.

¹ From sermon titled "These are They" by David Clark, November 4, 2014. Found at uccredlands.org. Name changed to a name that wouldn't be present in our congregation.

To grasp our scripture's meaning in context—something that's always important to do—we need to go to chapter 6, where John describes destruction and ends the chapter with these words: "Then the kings of the earth and the magnates and the generals and the rich and the powerful and everyone, slave and free, hid in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, calling to the mountains and rocks, 'Fall on us and hide us from the face of the one seated on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb, for the great day of their wrath has come, and who is able to stand?'" (Revelation 6:15-17).

When John reaches that point in his visions, he stops. The suffering and destruction are overwhelming, and so he introduces a break, a timeout, that he uses to lift the vision of God's people from the difficulties of the present to the glories of the future. That break, that timeout, those words of comfort, are in chapter 7. What he sees is a vast international, multi-racial, multi-lingual throng of people so great that no one could count it.

John gives us a preview of the way things are to be. The people he sees wear white robes and carry palm branches. The robe is an important piece of clothing in the Bible. It signals not only outward clothing but reveals who the person is, what his or her status is. In the story of the prodigal son, the returning son is given a new robe, not just so that he would have something clean to wear but as an indication of his restored place in the family. A restored place in God's family!

Believers, then, wear the white robe of purity. Further down in our reading, we learn that these robes are so white because they have been washed in the blood of the Lamb. Anyone who has done any laundry at all knows that this image alone is a reversal of what one would think would happen. But here the blood of the Lamb—what Jesus sacrificed for us—purifies the people and takes away their sin, and so their robes are white not in spite of being washed in the blood but because of it.

And they carry palm branches. Palm branches would have been understood as signs of victory and joy. It's why people waved palm branches on what we call Palm Sunday because Jesus was coming to save them and they would be victorious. Verses 15-17 contain great words of comfort. They are worth hearing again as we remember the saints on this All Saints Sunday.

"For this reason they are before the throne of God and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them. They will hunger no more and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat, for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes" (Revelation 7:15-17).

Believers stand before God's throne and worship God. God, in turn, will shelter them. The word translated as "shelter" is the word that also is translated as "dwell." It's a comfort to dwell in God's presence and have the assurance that God will remain with them. In a world in which subsistence was the normal pattern of life, the vision of no more hunger or thirst is communicated at a visceral level. Relief from the sun and from heat reflects life in the Middle East. People had to protect themselves from the sun.

In the final verse, John once more plays with language and images. It is the Lamb who will be the shepherd and will lead God's people to the "springs of the water of life." It is hard for us to imagine but the image of a shepherd was one of comfort—so much so that the earliest known images of Jesus were of a shepherd. Beginning in the second century, less than 80-100 years after Revelation was written, vast burial tunnels known as catacombs were carved into the soft volcanic rock surrounding Rome.

The catacombs of San Callisto were built sometime around 150. Keep in mind that Christianity was illegal until 313, when the emperor Constantine signed the Edict of Milan. On the ceiling of the burial tunnel is the image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd. Jesus as a young man, carrying a lamb over his shoulders—the good shepherd willing to sacrifice even his life for his sheep.²

With that vision in their minds and hearts, those who listen to the reading of Revelation are ready to continue their journey through John's visions by having given thanks to the one who has saved them and who provides everything needed for life. And the question that John asked at the end of chapter 6, "So who is able to stand?" is answered, "Those whom the Lamb has washed." With that word of encouragement, this persecuted minority—the first-century church—is able to move ahead because they know where God is taking them. And today's believers know the same.

We take comfort, as did they, in knowing what happens to our cloud of witnesses that have gone before us. Some in that cloud you only know by name. They left this world before you entered. Some in the cloud you only know by a faint memory. You remember them as advanced in age, when you were a child. They are part of the cloud who is encouraging you. Some in the cloud you knew well. They were part of your daily life. You sought out their advice and wisdom. Your life has never been the same. The good news is that they are part of the cloud. They are in the balcony encouraging you to remain in the faith and live for Jesus.

Some in the cloud are newcomers to this cloud of witnesses. They are the hardest ones. The wound of grieving is still fresh. We are still trying to figure out how to live our lives without them. Their burdens and worries in this world are gone, but our pain is still raw. In our church community, we remember by name Steve Smith, Ray Sturm, Sandy Burns, Nance Bower, Lida Harrison, Lou Ann Kjoson, Mike Jackson, Mildred Thompson, Carolyn Hetzler, John Hall, and Peg Schneider. They are a part of the cloud, encouraging us as a church community, cheering us on, wanting us to be our best because that's what they taught us to be.

Those are our names as a congregation. Who are your names? I think it is important on this day, as an act of worship, to say the name that is on your heart out loud as well. Who is that person of influence for you that you know is cheering you on. In just a moment, I will be quiet and I would like for you to say your name. We'll take the time that we need. It will be messy. We'll talk over one another, but God will hear. When you have spoken your name, just listen and give thanks for the other names that fill the room. Let's begin...

O blest communion, company divine! We live and struggle, they in glory shine; yet all are one in thee, for all are thine. Alleluia, alleluia.

² <https://aleteia.org/2019/05/12/three-of-the-oldest-images-of-jesus-portrays-him-as-the-good-shepherd/>