

Title: The Biggest Crowd

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Scripture: [Hebrews 12:1-3](#)

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

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The Biggest Crowd

I miss the crowd. Those of you who know me well, know that goes without saying. Like every preacher, I like a crowd at worship. Nowadays, a crowd in a church is considered dangerous, even irresponsible although we are very careful and safe in our services. Still, I long for days when crowds were okay. Today I am imagining the biggest

crowd.

What is the biggest crowd you have ever been a part of? I suspect what comes to mind for most people is a football game. Stadiums host big crowds. Lucas Oil Stadium holds 70,000. That's a big crowd but there is a bigger crowd like the Indianapolis Motor Speedway. They claim to have around 257,000 fixed seats, plus the infield. Back in the day, rumor had it that attendance was 400,000 people. Maybe that's the biggest crowd you've been in. That's big but there is a bigger crowd.

Today, on All Saints Sunday, we consider the biggest crowd. My agenda today is simply this. I hope you claim the biggest crowd. I hope that by the time we are through you'll understand that right now, you are part of the biggest crowd and it will just get bigger and bigger.

If you are a crowd watcher, you are going to be pleased. I'm one. When I find myself in a crowd, at a football game or the race, or even traveling in an airport, I watch people. Are you that way? I'm a crowd watcher and if I look carefully at the crowd I'm dreaming about, this is who I see.

I see a man bruised and battered, but his face is radiant, just like that of an angel. His name is Stephen and he is known as the first Christian martyr. All Saints Day was originally set aside to commemorate all those martyrs from the early persecutions whose names were never recorded and thus whose memory was in constant peril of being lost. The book of Hebrews describes some of the nameless this way. They were "...taunted and whipped; they were even put in chains and prison. They were stoned to

death, they were cut in two, and they died by being murdered with swords." (Hebrews 11: 36b-37) You thought you were going through a tough time with the pandemic. It's nothing compared to some in the biggest crowd.

There were seven major persecutions over the first three centuries after the resurrection of Jesus. Can you imagine what it would be like to live your life afraid to reveal your Christian identity, fearful that someone might find out that you are a Christian? Can you imagine what it would be like to come home and find your windows broken, your belongings in your yard, and your family is gone, all because you wear a cross, all because you say yes to Jesus? Persecutions are still taking place and people are still dying because they are Christian. They join those in this crowd who have died like Stephen, martyred. They are part of the biggest crowd.

There are others. Look more deeply; it's a big crowd. There is Able, who "...offered a better sacrifice to God than Cain" (Hebrew 11:4a) and Abraham who "...obeyed when he was called to go out to a place" (Hebrew 11:8a) which we called the Promised Land. Sarah's there too, "...who by faith received the ability to have a child" (Hebrews 11:11a) along with Rahab who by faith, "...welcomed the spies in peace." (Hebrews 11: 31). There is Isaac and his boys, Jacob and Esau. All twelve of Israel's sons are with Jacob. There is Moses and Joshua, David and Solomon, looking like he is the smartest man in the crowd. Elijah and Isaiah, all the prophets are in there. You could hear the whole story of the Old Testament first hand from the people in this crowd.

The New Testament folks are there too. Three Mary's. Mary Magadala, Mary the mother of James, Mary the mother of Jesus. They are part of this crowd. What would it be like to hear Mary recite her poem, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior..." (Luke 1: 46-47) It would be magnificent! The boys are still hanging out together, I bet, crowded together in this biggest crowd--Peter, James, and John, the Zebedee brothers, the sons of thunder now thunder in heaven—all the others too. If you are a crowd watcher, I'm sure you'll pick them out.

Barnabas, ever the encourager, Philemon, always useful, Lydia, probably dressed in purple instead of white. She had such a fondness for the color in Philippi.

There, do you see him? St. John of Patmos, looking like he has just left the beach. He first dreamed of this crowd. Do you remember his vision, read earlier? He said "... I looked, and there was a great crowd that no one could number. They were from every nation, tribe, people, and language. They were standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They wore white

robes and held palm branches in their hands.” (Revelation 7:9) It is the biggest crowd that has been and will ever be. John sees it and he asks, “Who are these people wearing white robes, and where did they come from?” I said to him, ‘Sir, you know.’ Then he said to me, ‘These people are coming out of great hardship. They have washed their robes and made them white in the Lamb's blood. This is the reason they are before God's throne’” (Revelations 7:12-14)

This crowd isn't just a biblical crowd. It is all who gone have before us, all who have lived through the trials and tribulations, the ordeal and hardship. Look carefully. There are the early church fathers, Ambrose and Augustine who he baptized. There is Luther who reformed the church, 503 years ago yesterday. I see Calvin, founder of the Presbyterians, and Campbell and Stone, our church fathers. Martin Luther King is there perhaps hanging out with Billy Graham. There is Mother Teresa. She isn't the only mother there. There are mothers all over the place including my mother and maybe yours. Fathers too. Grandfathers, grandmothers, brothers and sisters, and our brothers and sisters so recently offered up. Look carefully again with holy imagination the new arrivals. There is Roma Mullin and Evelyn Watkins, Suzy Nierste, Judy Blankenship, and Sharlot Grayson. You can see Midolla Wease, Martha Davis, and Joyce Sink. There is Bill Barrett and dear, dear Joan Hill. Loretta and Larry Jabaai surprised to have arrived so soon together. Alex Ash, you arrived too early. Just a few weeks ago, the most recent, the faithful pastor Norm Meyer and the yesterday, Kim Geisinger. Surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, those who we remember today, our people.

I met a man once who believed he had no people. He walked in off the streets of LA, sat down in my office, and asked for money for a sandwich. Before I could offer him the money, he told me that he had no one. He was left the doorstep of a fire station when he barely out of the womb, wrapped in a blanket that was so soiled that it should never have touched a newborn's skin. The state put him in a foster home and then he said, “I bounced around, from family to family because no one wanted to adopt a discarded baby of mixed descent with this ugly birth defect.” It was obvious to the point of frightening. “You have no one?” “No one,” he said. “I ran away from the last place when I was 15. I've been on the streets since. Don't pity me. Just give me money for a sandwich.” And then, as if to make me more generous, he said, “I believe in Jesus” “Then you've got people, a crowd, the biggest crowd you can imagine then bigger still.” “I never thought of it that way,” he said as he took five dollars and left.

Maybe you have never thought of it that way. You should, often. In a highly individualized culture, in a world that says everything is about me, it is important to remember this. There is no such thing as a private Christian

and a personal faith. You are part of a big crowd, the biggest crowd that has ever been or ever will be.

All Saints Day reminds us that we aren't so much a community of recollection as a fellowship of participation and anticipation. That is to say, we participate today and anticipate tomorrow. You participate, you are part of the whole of God's history, actors as God's history unfolds. The whole of God's history in the world belongs to you and you participate in it as part of the biggest crowd. But you also anticipate the biggest crowd, the promise of a time when you have come out of the great hardship. You will be one in the ceaseless circle of praise which Saint John sees so vividly, whose object is the throne of God and love of Jesus from whom, Saint Paul tells us, nothing can separate you from. You are part of that crowd."¹

Hebrews calls the biggest crowd, our great crowd of witnesses. We depend on them for inspiration; they depend on us, to finish well. This is how he sees it. "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us..." (Hebrew 12:1) When you are burdened with the challenges of life, when your days bring hardship, when the problem of pandemic and social unrest mount, you aren't alone. You are surrounded by the biggest crowd. They are there "so that you may not grow weary or lose heart." (Hebrew 12:3)

Oh, the benefits of being part of the biggest crowd! They sustain us when we are reminded that our faith is both ancient and eternal. What we say and do has been passed on for millenniums and it will never end. That gives courage for today and hope for tomorrow. It should remind you that when you worship when you connect with God's Word, it not just some personal or private, moment. It is part of God's history, unfolding and our voices and lives join all who have gone before us and all who will ever be.

Think of the many of throughout the ages have found themselves at dawn on a mountain top or a beach or kneeling in prayer in an ancient monastery. The darkness is shattered with light and they think "God said, "Let there be light..." Have you ever, like them, experienced light and given thanks to God as Creator? If so, you were part of the biggest crowd.

Think about someone reciting words, by a grave, by a hospital bed, when lost and afraid, "The Lord is my shepherd." Can you hear the many voices who have said it over and over again for thousands of years? You have said it. When you did, you joined the biggest crowd.

Think about the many around campfires, in chapels and sanctuaries, like this or in great stadiums filled for a Billy Graham revival. Think of those throughout the ages who walked forward and like Peter were asked, "Do you believe?" Yes, I believe, Jesus is "the Messiah, the Son of the living God." my personal savior. Do you? Have you? If yes, then hear this. You are part of "A great crowd, so many that no one can count. They are from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages." (Revelation 7:9b)

On this All Saints Sunday two-thousand and twenty years after the resurrection of our Lord and Savior, own that, claim that. You have people. You are surrounded by a great crowd of witnesses, the biggest crowd. They give us strength for the hardship of these days and hope for our shared eternity.

¹Gomes, Peter J.; Gates, Henry L. (2009-03-17). Sermons: Biblical Wisdom For Daily Living (p. 228). HarperOne. Kindle Edition.