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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
11/2/2008, All Saints Sunday  
Revelation 7:9-17, Matthew 5:1-12

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My text this morning is from that mysterious, final book of the Bible, from Revelation Chapter Seven. The first verse of our reading gives a glorious vision of the redeemed. St. John writes this:

<sup>9</sup>After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands.

Now, my dear brothers and sisters in the Lord, as you imagine that scene, it is important that you place *yourself* there, somewhere in the midst of that happy crowd. Yes, and not only yourself, but also those faithful people in your life who now rest from their labors and dwell in the Church Triumphant. Think of people dear to you, perhaps mother or father, sister or brother, spouse or friend. Think too of the unnamed saints of this earth who were regarded as nothing special during their lives, or who might have suffered blow after blow or steady deprivation. Think of all the saints in that great multitude of heaven, where they do not sigh or grieve, for God himself has wiped away every tear from their eyes. But do not neglect to place *yourself* in that good crowd.

Let us suppose that there is someone on a mountaintop looking down at that heavenly multitude through a telescope. He sees a wonderful variety of people, all dressed in white, with palm branches in their hands. He sees people “from every nation.” Here in this earthly life, those nations might have been at war with one another, and the citizens of such conflicting nations might have feared and distrusted each other. But not here, not in this celestial city, for they are all gathered around the Lamb — the very Prince of Peace.

Again, the fellow from the mountaintop sees people from “all tribes” and “all languages.” In this present age, the multiplication of languages is a form of suffering for humanity, because it hinders the commerce of goods, ideas, knowledge, and the feelings of the heart. I mean, it is a sad, sad thing to want to speak to someone, but to not have the words for it. But not here, not in St. John’s vision of the heavenly multitude. Here Babel is undone. Here the confusion of languages that has so hindered humanity is reversed, and we can imagine neighbor speaking to neighbor in words that are fair and square and true to the goodwill that each bears for the other.

Again, in that heavenly multitude there are people from “every tribe.” Tribal and racial backgrounds are no problem in that great crowd. Far from being a problem, I bet they are a joy there. It is not that the crowd is somehow blended into one uniform color, but rather the eyes of the heart are opened to the beauty of each race and each color, and no one would be without the other races.

So, the man on the mountain observes this variety and is pleased by it. But chiefly he notices the vast extent of the crowd. He sees a “multitude.” He sees a “great” multitude. Indeed, he sees a crowd so vast that it constitutes “a great multitude that no one could

count” You might have heard of a particular number of the redeemed in Revelation: 144,000. It is a number symbolizing completeness: twelve squared times ten cubed. But even primitive people knew the difference between 144,000 and a multitude that “no one *could* count.” This crowd is much larger than a college football stadium or two. Rather, this crowd is innumerable.

So, it is a vast crowd, and in this crowd, there you are, and there you will be. When the man on the mountain turns his telescope in your direction, you can look up and wave at him, for you will be there, in that blessed multitude, to be seen. How do I know? Because in the name of the Lord, I am offering you admission to that great city. Right here and now, I am offering you entrance into heaven. Please do not decline it.

For many of you, I am simply reminding you of a much earlier offer in your life — the time when Jesus claimed you in your baptism. Maybe you were an infant, maybe a grown-up. Either way, Jesus has entered your life and bid you walk with him, through trials all the way into heaven. If you take that walk, you will surely end in that heavenly crowd.

For some of you, you are not yet baptized. Still, be pleased to know that Jesus has been waiting for you and waits for you even now. He wants you too to be his and to cling to him through thick and thin, all the way to that celestial city where you will be dressed in white and carry palm branches saluting Jesus.

Whether you are meant for heaven is easy. You are! The more interesting question is whether Jesus means something to you, indeed means everything to you so that come what may, you mean to cling to him.

So, one of the themes of the book of Revelation is the joy of the saints, their vast numbers, their white robes, their palm branches, and the joy in their hearts because God himself has wiped away the tears from every eye.

But there is a second theme in the book, and it has a very real feel to it. I mean this: Brothers and sisters, we have miles to go before we rest. We will be in heaven ‘err long, yet before we get there, we will pass through trials and troubles.

The Bible teaches that there will be such trials, troubles, and tribulations on earth as the end times approach. And I believe we have lived to see such days of trouble.

This morning’s reading is from Revelation, Chapter Seven. But let me tell you a bit about Chapter Six. It recounts the woes unleashed on this dear, old earth of ours. The sequence of woes follows the sequence of the lifting of the seals on a certain scroll. The scroll describes the end times. Think of a scroll like the one we see draped over the arm of the right hand statue in our reredos. Perhaps from where you sit you can see the quill pen St. John holds in his right hand. He holds a pen because he is an “evangelist,” a writer. And notice that he has a long rectangular sheet draped over his left arm. That is a scroll. It is the material he wrote upon — maybe a long, linen or papyrus sheet.

Now imagine that scroll to be rolled up and held in place by seven seals or latches. In Revelation Chapter Six, the Lamb - our Lord Jesus - undoes each seal, one at a time, and as he does so, St. John is permitted to see the woes that shall beset our world.

In the printed version of this sermon, which Christine Hoffman so faithfully posts on our website a couple days down the road, you can read about all seven of the woes<sup>1</sup>. They

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<sup>1</sup>Using the picturesque titles of the Scottish Bible teacher William Barclay, here are the seven woes of Revelation Chapter Six:

The white horse of conquest:

include things like military conflicts, the disintegration of human relationships, pestilence and death, and the falling of the stars, which to ancient people was a terrible symbol of instability in the universe.

Here, I want to linger a bit with the black horse of famine. It concerns economic chaos and suffering on earth:

<sup>5</sup>When he broke the third seal, I heard the third living creature shout, 'Come!' Immediately I saw a black horse appear, and its rider was holding a pair of scales; <sup>6</sup>and I seemed to hear a voice shout from among the four living creatures and say, 'A day's wages for a quart of corn, and a day's wages for three quarts of barley, but do not tamper with the oil or the wine.'

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<sup>1</sup>Then, in my vision, I saw the Lamb break one of the seven seals, and I heard one of the four living creatures shout in a voice like thunder, 'Come!' <sup>2</sup>Immediately I saw a white horse appear, and its rider was holding a bow; he was given a victor's crown and he went away, to go from victory to victory.

The blood-red horse of strife:

<sup>3</sup>When he broke the second seal, I heard the second living creature shout, 'Come!' <sup>4</sup>And out came another horse, bright red, and its rider was given this duty: to take away peace from the earth and set people killing each other. He was given a huge sword.

The black horse of famine:

<sup>5</sup>When he broke the third seal, I heard the third living creature shout, 'Come!' Immediately I saw a black horse appear, and its rider was holding a pair of scales; <sup>6</sup>and I seemed to hear a voice shout from among the four living creatures and say, 'A day's wages for a quart of corn, and a day's wages for three quarts of barley, but do not tamper with the oil or the wine.'

The pale horse of pestilence and death:

<sup>7</sup>When he broke the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature shout, 'Come!' <sup>8</sup>Immediately I saw another horse appear, deathly pale, and its rider was called Death, and Hades followed at its heels. They were given authority over a quarter of the earth, to kill by the sword, by famine, by plague and through wild beasts.

The souls of the martyrs and their cry for justice:

<sup>9</sup>When he broke the fifth seal, I saw underneath the altar the souls of all the people who had been killed on account of the Word of God, for witnessing to it. <sup>10</sup>They shouted in a loud voice, 'Holy, true Master, how much longer will you wait before you pass sentence and take vengeance for our death on the inhabitants of the earth?' <sup>11</sup>Each of them was given a white robe, and they were told to be patient a little longer, until the roll was completed of their fellow-servants and brothers who were still to be killed as they had been.

The shattered universe:

I fear that we have lived to see days like these. The breaking of this third seal unleashes famine and stark inequities of wealth. The ancient people of Palestine were acquainted with three commodities which meant a lot to them: corn, oil, and wine. But these are different sorts of commodities. Corn refers to the basic foods needed for survival, to ward off starvation. The other two, oil and wine, refer to luxuries.

The strange thing about the breaking of this third seal is that it unleashes economic devastation on the price of corn, but not the oil or the wine. Think about that cry concerning the corn: ‘A day’s wages for a quart of corn.’ Not a gallon of corn, not a ton of corn, but a mere quart. I have a box of Quaker Oats at home. It weights two pounds ten ounces, and it adds up to more than a quart. I guess I could support my family on one box of oatmeal per day, but what of all the other expenses of life? How would I pay the rent? How would I buy clothing for the family? What if I became sick or someone else in my family became sick? How would I be able to buy the tools of my trade if I were a farmer or a carpenter. We are talk about sustenance living. In fact, the saying about a “day’s wages” for a quart of corn means starvation for many families.

Meanwhile, the cost of the oil and wine are not disturbed. Oh, they might go up, but they do not go up in such a way as to disturb the ability of well-to-do people to obtain them. And so, St. John foresees a time when vast stretches of humanity will be struggling against starvation, while part of humanity continues with luxuries.

These are the days. In an almost spooky article in *The Economist*, we read of the decline of cheap food in the world<sup>2</sup>. The rise of incomes in Asia and the subsidizing of ethanol production in America mean that food becomes more expensive across the world. The problem is not that there is not enough corn in the world, it is rather that it is becoming too expensive for multitudes of humanity who live on the threshold of starvation.

A similar thing is happening here in America because of the decline of the stock market. It does not hit every one the same. If you are working, enjoying regular pension contributions, and have money to invest, then a falling market means you can buy more for your investment. But if you are unemployed or if you are retired living on a fixed

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<sup>12</sup>In my vision, when he broke the sixth seal, there was a violent earthquake and the sun went as black as coarse sackcloth; the moon turned red as blood all over, <sup>13</sup>and the stars of the sky fell onto the earth like figs dropping from a fig tree when a high wind shakes it; <sup>14</sup>the sky disappeared like a scroll rolling up and all the mountains and islands were shaken from their places.

The time of terror:

<sup>15</sup>Then all the kings of the earth, the governors and the commanders, the rich people and the men of influence, the whole population, slaves and citizens, hid in caverns and among the rocks of the mountains. <sup>16</sup>They said to the mountains and the rocks, ‘Fall on us and hide us away from the One who sits on the throne and from the retribution of the Lamb. <sup>17</sup>For the Great Day of his retribution has come, and who can face it?’

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.economist.com/displaystory.cfm?story\\_id=10250420](http://www.economist.com/displaystory.cfm?story_id=10250420)

income but have not annuitized your core expenses, then the declining market means that you are selling low and falling behind.

This Chapter, Revelation Six, ends with a picture of terror on earth and with a soul-searching question:

<sup>16</sup>They said to the mountains and the rocks, 'Fall on us and hide us away from the One who sits on the throne and from the retribution of the Lamb. <sup>17</sup>For the Great Day of his retribution has come, and who can face it?'

Who can face it? This question is the reason I started this sermon as I did. To this question, "Who can face it?" the important answer is this one: *You* can. When you read about the innumerable hosts of heaven, with their white robes, palm branches, peace, and joy, you must include yourself in that picture, for you belong to Jesus, if you do not deny him, and he means to lead us to that good celestial city.

All the promises of Holy Scripture belong to you as you face the troubles of life. For example, here was one of my mother's favorite verses:

And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.(Rom 8:28, KJV)

And here is one of Ann Siemer's favorite verses:

But Jesus beheld them, and said unto them, With men this is impossible; but with God all things are possible.(Matthew 19:26, KJV)

And here is a verse beloved to all people of faith:

<sup>10</sup>Be still, and know that I am God: I will be exalted among the heathen, I will be exalted in the earth. <sup>11</sup>The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.(Psalm 46:10-11, KJV)

It makes quite a difference to know you have a hope that will not fail you. Along with all of humanity, you might be rocked, discouraged, and suffering these days. But also, be pleased to know something that I wish all of humanity would know, and which was phrased so beautifully by Martin Luther in that hymn we loved to sing last Sunday. In the second verse of *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*, Luther speaks of the devilish forces arrayed against humanity, but in spite of the devil, Luther is joyful. He speaks of a Champion at our side:

No strength of ours can match his might!  
We would be lost, rejected.  
But now a *champion* comes to fight,  
whom God himself elected.  
Ask who this may be:  
Lord of hosts is he!  
Jesus Christ, our Lord,  
God's only Son, adored.  
He holds the field victorious.

This is the reason for confidence both for ourselves and for those dear to us who now rest from their labors and are permitted to see Jesus face to face: Jesus is our Champion who will lead us safely through these troubles and land us on the far side, where God himself shall wipe away the tears from every eye.

I believe that St. Paul puts it all together in this verse:

And let us not be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not.(Galatians 6:9, KJV)

Yes, in due season we shall reap, through the grace and merits of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.