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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
11/1/2015, All Saints Sunday
Revelation 21

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

My text this morning is from our Second Lesson, from Revelation 21. There we read this:

³and I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling of God is with men [with human beings]. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them; ⁴he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away.” (Revelation 21:3-4, RSV)

One of my favorite prayers speaks of those who rejoice with us, “but upon another shore and in a greater light.” It is a prayer you and I could well pray, for I bet that each of us has someone dear to us on that yonder shore, and for all we know, err long, we too might be joining them. In this morning’s sermon, I want to use our reading from Revelation 21 to explore this prayer. The prayer goes this way:

Heavenly Father, we remember before you all those who rejoice with us, but upon another shore and in a greater light, that multitude which none can number, whose hope was in the Word made flesh. And we pray that we too will be counted among the communion of saints, receiving grace to offer unto you reasonable service, living in unity and fellowship with all your people, and giving reverence to all that you have made, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

To my mind, All Saints Sunday completes and perfects Christmas. I like to imagine, as other preachers have done too, the approach of that first Christmas, up there in heaven. The rumors were flying, I am sure. The angelic amazement and admiration at the news must have filled their good hearts. “Have you heard?” they say to one another. “The blessed One, the only begotten Son of the Father: he means to become incarnate of the maid Mary, a virgin. He means to say good-bye to us and to become a man, forever!. He means to surrender this heavenly world, where we adore him and worship him. He means to become a man – aye, and a poor man, with nowhere to lay his head. And he means to contend with the devil down there. He means to fight on the side of humanity. He means even to

overcome death for those creatures who broke our hearts, who ate from the forbidden tree, who rebelled against their Maker, and who welcomed death into their own midst. They cannot be saved unless he saves them. So he is off. Wonders of wonders! He is off to a manger in Bethlehem.”

And so it is that Jesus bears the name “Immanuel” – that good name of our church. Christmas granted him that name. He is Immanuel, God with us.

But now, on All Saints Sunday, the name Immanuel becomes even more magnified, for the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, chooses to dwell on earth, and to bring heaven with them.

St. Paul pictures the Lord gathering up the saints into heaven. In Paul’s famous passage about the “sound of the trumpet,” the apostle pictures an upward movement of Christians, both those who are dead and those who are alive:

¹⁶For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the archangel’s call, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first; ¹⁷then we who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air; and so we shall always be with the Lord. (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17, RSV)

But that is St. Paul. St. John in our reading from Revelation 21 sees things the other way round. The saints do not rise up into the clouds, but rather, the New Jerusalem will descend onto earth, and God shall dwell here on earth with his people.¹

Imagine the consternation of Satan. In the book of Job, Satan is not yet the hate-filled enemy of humanity we find in the New Testament. In Job, Satan seems to be a respected member of the heavenly court. He has a particular job within that court. He is the prosecuting attorney. His job is to sift humanity, to accuse them before the Lord, which is what he does to poor Job.

Well, when the heavenly rumors begin to spread that God intends to dwell with human beings on earth, I can imagine Satan or some other skeptical angel going up to the Lord and saying, “I fear that you are getting out-of-control here, Lord. Your love for these frail, sinful creatures is driving you to extraordinary lengths. First, you send the Son to earth to save them, at the cost of his cruel death. And now you mean to dwell with them, forever. And where you are, we must go too, for there is no heaven without you. The whole Communion of Saints, the angels, the archangels, the seraphim, and the cherubim: we are all to dwell on earth with those human beings if you have your way.” And the gospel is that the Lord means

¹ Rf. Gerhard A. Krodel, *Revelation*, in the series *Augsburg Commentaries on the New Testament* (Augsburg Publishing House, Minneapolis, Minnesota, 1989), pages 344-45.

to have his way! Our earth is destined for the New Jerusalem, together with the heavenly host, and with our Maker himself, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit!

And when our Maker dwells with us, he means first off all to comfort us. Wonderful consolations they are too:

⁴he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away.

Years pass, and at last tears tend to leave our eyes. But the ache in our hearts at the lost of loved ones remains, and we sure would be glad to see them again! Well, God himself shall wipe away every tear from our eyes, and he will wipe them away in such manner that our hearts shall be entirely happy again, for “death shall be no more.” That huge, grim reality that stalks humanity and has grabbed hold of some of the best people this world has ever know: death shall be “no more”! Therefore we can look forward to seeing our loved ones again. “Begone!” God shall say to death, and it shall scurry away forever.

Likewise with all mourning, crying, and pain: they shall pass away. This is important. This magnifies our hope a thousand fold. I mean, it is good that “death shall be no more.” But it is also good that there shall be no more crying nor pain any more, for this present world has more than its full share of crying and pain. There are some people on this earth, including some Christians, who live their entire lives and when they die, it is pretty much an accurate report to say, “They had a tough life.” Nearly always poor, always wondering how to make ends meet, sick in body, disregarded in reputation, accustomed to disappointment, with aches and pains beyond what most of us know, overlooked and neglected for most of their years. They might not even know how to be happy, ordinary happiness being so unfamiliar to them. But in the New Jerusalem, they shall learn to be happy. They will have plenty of time to grow into happiness, for death shall be no more, neither mourning, nor crying, nor pain any more, for those former things, as St. John says, “have passed away.” Amen!

So, there are good and faithful people in this world who, by and large, had a tough life, and then they died. They died in Christ. But when death is banished from the new Jerusalem, they will have a second chance, only this time it will be in a city where there is no more sadness or pain or tears.

Expelled too will that sin that besets us, those temptations that so often defeat us, that meanness and discourtesy that disrupts our human community. Begone! the Lord shall say. And then our New Jerusalem, our holy city on earth, shall flourish.

The prayer I like speaks of that “multitude”:

Heavenly Father, we remember before you all those who rejoice with us, but upon another shore and in a greater light,

that multitude which none can number, whose hope was in the Word made flesh.

The book of Revelations speaks of that multitude too — indeed, it speaks of “a great multitude.” As I read aloud the passage, you might be able to think of someone dear to you who endured in faith, even when the going was hard. Count that one among the Lord’s “great multitude.” Even more, determine about yourself that you mean to be among that great multitude that proves faithful. In Revelation 7 we read this:

⁹After this I beheld, and, lo, a great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues, stood before the throne, and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, and palms in their hands;... ¹⁴And [one of the elders] said to me, These are they which came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. ¹⁵Therefore are they before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple: and he that sitteth on the throne shall dwell among them. ¹⁶They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more; neither shall the sun light on them, nor any heat. ¹⁷For the Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall feed them, and shall lead them unto living fountains of waters: and God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes. (Revelation 7:9-17, KJV)

Sometimes we look at the world around us and wonder how much longer we can go on – things seems so frightening and worrisome to us. We fear wars and rumors of wars, we fear nuclear weapons, we fear epidemics, we fear for the environment, we fear an upsurge of hatred and violence, we fear suicides and crime and terrorism. All of this fear is natural and rational. It is reasonable to be worried.

And yet the Bible ends with the book of Revelation. And Revelation ends with victory – victory that would be hard for science to predict. All Saints Sunday would remind us that we are not alone – that God himself fights on our side, that the Communion of Saints still exists, still cheers us on, and still awaits to be with us again, 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.