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Feast of All Saints
4 November 2012
Grace-Trinity Lutheran Churches, Wichita
Revelation 7:2-17

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

When Colton Burpo was asked what he most wanted people to know about his experience of heaven he said, "I want them to know that heaven is for real."¹

That became the title of the NY Times bestseller a couple years ago; you might've read it.

That book, among others like it, tries to make heaven *real*.

But how do you make Heaven real to people who don't seem to experience Heaven until they die?

That's what All Saints' Day is for.

Part of the genius-ness of the Church Calendar is placing Reformation Day and All Saints' Day side-by-side.

Reformation is Red: the color of the martyrs, the color of blood, the color fiery Pentecost.
All Saints is White: the color of purity and innocence and holiness—
the color of the saints victorious.

Reformation gives us the Battle Hymn: *A Mighty Fortress*.
All Saints Day calls us to sing the sweet melodies *For All the Saints*.

One is marked by suffering, the other by joy.

And yet, as different as these two Holy Days appear, they are together days of the One Church.

Not two different churches.

Not two separate people.

But one: one, holy, Christian, and apostolic Church!

Last week we confessed the Church Militant: at war against Satan and suffering its many crosses.
Today, we confess the Church Triumphant, clothed in victory, singing joyous hymns of praise.

Again, not two churches, but one Church straddling the threshold of time:
one foot in this world of cross and suffering, the other in heavenly bliss.

And that's why we have a hard time thinking of Heaven as something *real*.

We don't see it or feel it or understand it.

So we come up with our own versions of heaven.

We think of fat little cherubs, bouncing from cloud to cloud, playing their harps.

We think of a world of spirits, floating in and out.

And then there are all those images of the things we think we'd like to do:

¹ Todd Burpo, *Heaven Is for Real: A Little Boy's Astounding Story of His Trip to Heaven and Back* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2010), 154.

whether it's finally having time to read the books you want to read,
or driving that dream car you know you'll never get in this lifetime,
or playing shortstop in your field of dreams.

We all have our fantasies, even our children—
but is that really what Heaven is like,
is that the *Heaven is for Real* of the Scriptures?

The Bible gives us many snippets of Heaven.
Every time a prophet has a vision, or an angel reveals himself, or Jesus comes on the scene—
there you get a glimpse of Heaven.

Our reading today from Revelation is this sort of vision of Heaven.
St. John was given to peer into this heavenly reality,
he was called to listen, and see, ask questions, and interact with the going-on of heaven.

And in this passage there are actually two visions:
The first is better for Reformation day,
the second for All Saints.

The first is a battle scene.
Just before our reading began, we hear of four angels holding back the four winds of destruction.
Then there is a massive gathering of people, 144,000 to be exact.
They're lined up in troops for battle, 12 rows of 12,000 men:
12,000 from each of the tribes of Israel (a perfect gathering of His chosen ones).
And in the midst of them a 5th angel arises, sealing each of these 144,000 on their foreheads—
marking them with the Name of the Lord and a cross, sending them out for battle.

The second vision is entirely different.
The time gap between verses 8 and 9 is immense.
Once verse 9 hits, we're done with time-lines, out of numbering,
out of chronology and dates and months and seasons and years.

“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!’”
(Rev 7:9-10)

This is a picture of *All Saints*: from every tribe and nation and people and language.
And that means, *you*.

Americans, Germans, Koreans, Latvians.
English speakers with Spanish speakers, the Chinese and the Malagasy.
(You can even find Canadians here, Lorraine!)
Natives and immigrants, all together, all in white robes, all with palm branches, all singing.

That's Heaven. And you're in it.

That's right, St. John saw *you*.

You were waving your palm branch.

You were dressed in white.

You were singing the praises of our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.

You were among those “**coming out of the great tribulation.**

Having washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.” (7:14)

This great multitude, that no one could number, from every nook and cranny of this Earth,
includes *you*.

This is the gathering of All Saints around *Jesus*.

This is the Church.

The Church is the gathering of saints, Christians, believers around Jesus.

That's you! And that's why you're here.

You're not here to do all the things you've always wanted to do but haven't had time.

You're not here to catch pitches, or meet princesses, or be lifted up on a pedestal—
you're here to see Jesus.

And in that, you will not be disappointed.

But if you came for some other reason, then you're sure to be let down.

This isn't the place of your fantasies.

This isn't the excitement of a concert or a rollercoaster or another crime-scene show.

If you came for yourself, to do what you've always wanted to do, or be something you aren't,
then both Church and Heaven will be a letdown.

Because here and there it's all about Jesus.

He is the center.

He sits on the throne.

He reigns and comforts and feeds and shepherds.

He wipes every tear from our eyes and shelters us with His presence.

Here it's not about you, but about Jesus for you.

It's about fixing our eyes on the Lamb who was slain for us.

It's about Him washing our robes and making them shockingly bright white in His blood.

It's about Him sealing us with His Name—

baptizing us, clothing us with His garment of salvation,

feeding us with His body and His blood,

forgiving our sins, declaring us innocent and holy—*saints!*

and protecting us through the great tribulation.

Sure, it starts with Him sending us out, all in our troops, all marked and sealed for battle—
sent with the Word of truth, and the Reformation faith of grace alone.

But All Saints is the picture of the end, the victory, the Lamb seated on the throne.
All Saints is that day where we rejoice with all who have passed on already,
who already are gathered around the throne of the Lamb and singing His praises.

All Saints is here to remind you that this Heaven to come is also *for real* now and here.

My girls are starting to get it.
If you ask them, “Where is Heaven?” They’ll tell you, “In Church.”
And they’re right.

For this is the meeting place of Heaven and Earth.
It’s here that God comes to man.
Here that Jesus sits on His throne and reigns victoriously.
Here He does His feeding and nourishing and baptizing and clothing and sealing with His name.
Here He forgives.

Wherever Christ is, there is His Church.
And so this is where we are closest to our loved ones who have entered the Church Triumphant.
Here we dine together, sing together,
and gather together around our God, who sits on the throne, and before the Lamb.

Here it’s all about Jesus for you.

This is your foretaste of the feast to come.
This is your vision of the heavenly throne room.
This is Christ for you.

And that’s why you’re here.
Because Jesus is here.
Heaven is here.
All Saints are here: those in Heaven and those on Earth, together around the Lamb.

Blessed are you, for yours *is* the Kingdom of Heaven.

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