

Feast of All Saints – November 1, 2015, Year B

**St. Andrew's Anglican Church, Douglas, GA**

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ Rector

Scripture: Revelation 7: 2-4, 9-17

***“The Saints of God”***

This is a time of year that becomes very confusing for some people. We hear about All Hallows, All Hallows Eve, we see people of all kinds dressed up in costumes, we have All Souls Day and All Saints Day. Depending on where you hang your hat, theologically, the terms “saints” can mean different things. I can clearly remember in September of 2002, my family had left Jacksonville and we were renting a home in Ambridge, PA – it was my first week of seminary at Trinity School for Ministry. On Tuesdays and Thursdays, we attended a class called Spiritual Formation. What a group we were! Canon Daryl Fenton, Director of CMJ-USA and is one of the candidates for bishop of the Anglican diocese of the Great Lakes, and my wife Marilyn was a member of that class also, along with about 35 other students – we could basically be described as deer in the headlights – following each other to our classes, rolling our bags with our computers, trying to absorb as much as we could. Our first week of seminary – and our professor, a Presbyterian minister greeted us with “**good morning saints!**” Let me tell you, that was a paradigm change for me and this took some getting used to! Having grown up as a Roman Catholic – I was putty in the hands of the Dominican Nuns in Parochial School – and believe me - I had **never** been called a saint before! In the Roman Catholic tradition Saints were canonized by the Pope – and I was told by those nuns that I was nowhere near that, ever! But being someone who would “**never, ever make fun**” (pure cynicism) --- I promptly took my name card and proudly wrote above my first name “saint” – **it said St. John!** I thought - “Hey, I could get used to this.” Well, my best buddy throughout seminary – Fr. Dave Newhart – who is now the rector of St. Elizabeth’s in Sebastian, Florida, was even more full of mischief than I was. Well, not one to be outdone – he totally transformed his name card- and wrote in BIG letters – “SINNER DAVE.” And let me tell you - that funny label stayed with him right on through graduation! Saint John and Sinner Dave – affectionately known as “the Sons of Thunder,” but THAT is “a whole other story” – for another sermon altogether! Saints indeed! It was an incredible awakening for me to consider something differently regarding the term saints – and looking at today’s reading from the Book of Revelation a lot of people hang their hats on 144,000 saying that is the number of people who will be in heaven, but if you keep reading as we will, there was a group of people too numerous to count!

I want to suggest to you that “holiness” is only available through a relationship with Jesus Christ. Holiness – the word holy means “to be set apart.” All believers in Jesus Christ are saints – with a little “s.” I would like to share with you what for me is a clear picture of that holiness, reflected through the image that Our Lord gave to the Apostle John, on the island of Patmos, in the Book of Revelation. John saw some saints of God proclaiming “*praise and glory and honor and strength and might and wisdom to the Lamb who is seated at the center of the throne.*” All of this worship and praise belongs to one place, to the Lamb, because salvation only comes from the Lamb of God. Remember, it was John the Baptist who proclaimed this truth about Jesus in John 1:29 when he boldly said “*Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!*” (We will be singing that just before receiving Holy Communion today.) The Apostle John writes ‘*Salvation to our God*’ of the free gift that God gives to those who

believe in Him. Paul writes this precious message in Romans 6:23 *“For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”* When we sin – what we earn is death, our wages – but by the grace of God we do not get what we deserve because of what Jesus did on the cross for us! John realized that as he looked and saw all the praise that the Lamb of God deserved. He was reminded what Paul wrote to Timothy. *“For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus,”* *“who gave himself as a ransom for all men--the testimony given in its proper time.”* (1 Timothy 2:5-6). Remember John was living in exile on the island of Patmos. He did not choose to live there, it was because of his faith in Christ, and he was given the testimony of the Lamb of God – in its proper time.

Please turn with me to page 1921 in your Pew Bibles, to the Book of Revelation, chapter 7, verse 9. John saw the large crowd that was gathered: *“After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands.”* (Revelation 7:9) When else do we remember palm branches being waved over the King of Kings and Lord of Lords? It was on what became Palm Sunday when those people in Jerusalem recognized the divinity and kingship of Jesus. John also saw the four living creatures, the elders and the angels. His description of the throne in the center and the growing circle of those praising God - is nothing short of awesome. He says that all the saints are from all the corners on the earth—from every tribe and nation and language. It is not just the Jews, 144,000 is a large number of the Jewish people, and the rest are the nations. Whenever you hear the term “nations” it is talking about the Gentiles. The group that is worshipping the Lamb is expanding; no one could possibly count them—almost beyond imagination. John description is very clear; they were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands.

- White robes: the sign of purity, a sign of Christ’s righteousness and holiness.
- The palm branches: a sign of victory and royalty – of the King of Kings – recalling His triumphant entry into the earthly Jerusalem on the Sunday before He was crucified.

Look at verse 10: This great multitude cried out in a loud voice: *“Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.”* (Revelation 7:10) They were there - not because of what they had done - but **because of what the Lamb of God had done for them** and had done through them. He had made salvation possible for them; providing robes for them, that were washed in His blood that covered up their own sinfulness. They stood before Him - the Lamb of God, along with the living creatures and the angels and the elders, covered up with the robe of Christ’s righteousness – His holiness – and the Redemption that He provided for them. This image is one that cannot easily be erased. I would have to say that it is very inspiring, knowing the gift that Jesus loves us so much, that when we open the door of our hearts to Jesus Christ, and repent of our sins – forgiveness is real – and His righteousness becomes ours.

For each one of these saints –during their earthly life - they had received the grace of God’s divine forgiveness. John has a discussion with an elder that describes this. The elder asks John: *“These in white robes--who are they, and where did they come from?”* *“I answered, “Sir, you*

*know." And he said, "These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb." (Revelation 7:13-14)*

Depending on what you may have read - the word 'tribulation' is used quite a lot in describing "eschatology" – the study of the end times. Some have said there are going to be **seven years of tribulation before the Lord returns**, while there are others who have said there's going to be **seven years of tribulation after the Lord returns**. There are some who have said when the Lord returns there is going to be **seven years of tribulation right in the midst of all of that**. The Lord only tells us that there is a great tribulation. I might add that there is **no number seven here** or in any part of scripture connected with any tribulation. When you read something about seven years of tribulation, **it is interpretation, conjecture, and opinion**, much of which is drawn from the book of Daniel.

What does the Lord mean by tribulation? **He means troubles and hardship**. We don't want to get hung up on trying to find or debate details of the tribulation or the rapture – a word which by the way cannot be found anywhere in Scripture. By doing so we would be missing the point that the elder makes here in Revelation chapter 7; saying that these people who are standing here in the white robes **are here because their robes have been made white through the blood of Christ**. I am not here this morning to try and debate the tribulation or the rapture. Lots of movies and books have been made as well as many great theological papers and sermons. We should not lose sight of **the most important truth – the fact that the blood of the Lamb purifies us from all sin!**

I want to suggest to you this morning - that you and I do not deserve to wear white robes; you and I do not deserve to stand before the throne of God, yet the Lord promises each and every one of us - by faith, by the grace of God, that we WILL stand there. It is **not because of what we have done** but **because of what Christ has done**. The white robes symbolize God's divine gift of forgiveness. Those saints stood there, not with their own purity, but with the robes that were given to them cleansed by the blood of the Lamb of God. It is a reflection of Christ's Holiness, Christ's Righteousness, and the redemption that Christ has won for us and paid for us on the cross! God speaks through the Prophet Isaiah: "*Come now, and let us reason together," Says the LORD, "Though your sins are as scarlet, they will be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they will be like wool."* (Isaiah 1:18) This is God's promise to sinners who repent through Jesus Christ. Sinners like you and me - purified by God's divine forgiveness.

We all know that there are hardships in this world; there are troubles and tribulations that each one of us must face. All we have to do is turn on the evening news. In the early church, the disciples were thrown into prison just because they preached the Gospel. John himself is exiled on Patmos, since the poisoning by the Romans didn't work, all because of the persecution of the church under the rule of the Emperor Domitian, which by the way, was one of the worst times in the history of the church. Yet, what did the early apostles say? Acts 14 tells us after they were released from prison, "*We must go through many hardships to enter the*

*kingdom of God," they said.*" (Acts 14:22) The Lord says the saints have come through the tribulation. When a believer takes their last breath and leaves this world, as our dear sister Evelyn Souther did this last Tuesday, he or she has left behind all tribulation. They have left behind all hardship. They come to stand before God because of God's divine forgiveness.

I often use this phrase, when you and I look at the rear view mirror of our lives, besides seeing God's fingerprints over every aspect of our lives. How He has put people and things in our lives for specific reasons. We also see the effects of sin, which are devastating. No one on this earth can ever escape them. Even though people might try to deny sin, or that there is any type of consequence for sin, (we are familiar with people who have done that) there is no way you can escape it. Some might try to cover up some sins and hide them or explain them away, **sin is still sin**. Sin infects us all by virtue of being born into this fallen world. Just like none of us can escape death; none of us can escape sin. God speak through Ezekiel, the prophet, who writes: *"For every living soul belongs to me, the father as well as the son--both alike belong to me. The soul who sins is the one who will die."* (Ezekiel 18:4)

Just as no one has escapes death, so no one escapes sin. Believers in Christ Jesus are thankful because by God's divine forgiveness – *"For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord"* - our sins are forgiven. The blackness of our tarnished heart is covered by the blood of Jesus Christ so that we, like those saints who are standing before the throne of God, will one day also stand there with robes of His righteousness. HIS righteousness; His sinlessness; His salvation!

Salvation comes from the Lamb;

- the Lamb who is our shepherd;
- who provides us with divine forgiveness
- And provides us with eternal life.

Looking at Revelation and seeing the visions of John, sometimes they are almost beyond human comprehension. It has got to be the hardest book in the Bible to tackle! Time and after time we find the same people gathered there, the angels, the saints—singing out, *'Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.'* *"All the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshiped God," "saying: "Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!"*" (Revelation 7:11-12)

John then describes for us some of the amazing blessings of heaven by saying *"Therefore, "they are before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with His presence."* (Revelation 7:15) The angels, the saints – they are there day and night – worshipping Almighty God. How awesome is that? Sign me up! Nothing to worry about, nothing to fear, nothing to do except praise God; they don't get tired so they can do it day and night - forever and ever. He says the Lamb of God who sits on the throne will shelter them with His presence – another translation says “spread his tabernacle –

His tent over them.” Spreading a tent over people is making those people family! None of us can even fathom the blessedness of God Himself including us on His family. We only get a very little glimpse of it and a smaller still understanding of it. Even that just blows me away!

John continues with his description: *"Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat upon them, nor any scorching heat." "For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."* (Revelation 7:16-17) Can you imagine not being hungry? Not being thirsty? Not hurting?

John makes an incredible connection — that this Lamb is not just the Lamb of God but He is also the Good Shepherd. Jesus is not just the sacrificial Lamb, but He is the one who leads us to eternal life and to springs of the water of life – **living water!** Do you remember the Samaritan woman who came and sat at the well with Jesus and how He talked to her about the water of life? At the end of the conversation with this woman – Jesus says, *"whoever drinks of the water that I will give him shall never thirst; but the water that I will give him will become in him a well of water springing up to eternal life."* (John 4:14)

As believers of Jesus Christ as the Son of God – as the Lamb of God - we know as a certainty that heaven is our home. We are confident that no matter what happens in this life; no matter how much or how little we might have to suffer or how much or how little tribulation we go through, that God has blessed us with an eternal inheritance. The Kingdom of heaven is meant for you and me, for believers from every nation. In the beginning of chapter seven, it talks about the twelve thousand from the different tribes. John declares the saints are innumerable! They are from every nation and tribe. It is true-you and I are not Jews by birth. Does that mean that you and I do not have salvation? Certainly not! **You and I are Jews by faith.** Romans 11:17 – we have been grafted into the root – the root of Jesse, David’s father. We are the children, the adopted sons and daughters of Abraham. The Lord tells us that. The Lord reminds us that we are saved by God’s grace, not by birth.

In closing, I want to share with you the message that the Apostle Peter wrote in his first letter, during a time of great persecution for the church. This letter is full of encouragement, reminding us that no matter what you face and no matter what you lose on this earth - you still have God’s salvation. He encourages when he writes, *"Greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, so that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ; and though you have not seen Him, you love Him, and though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, obtaining as the outcome of your faith the salvation of your souls."* (1 Peter 1:6-9)

My brothers and sisters in Christ – WE do indeed have reason to rejoice, give thanks and sing - for **WE are the saints of God!**

