

November 2, 2025 – Revelation 7:2-4, 9-17 & 1 John 3:1-3

A few months ago, when Stefani's grandmother Marge died, we gathered with her family for her funeral Mass. Marge had been a devout Roman Catholic all her life. And the service was beautiful in many ways. There was reverence, Scripture readings, and hymns about the hope of heaven.

But one thing stood out. Again and again, we heard the priest and the prayers refer to "when she gets to heaven." Not that she was in heaven. Not that she now rests with Christ. But when she gets to heaven. After she has done her due time in purgatory.

It was well-intentioned, of course. But the language betrayed something deeper: uncertainty. A lack of confidence about where the saints really are when they die. And that kind of uncertainty leaves a painful hole when we're looking for comfort.

That's why this day – All Saints' Day – matters so deeply for us as Christians and, especially, as Lutherans. Today we don't simply remember the dead. We confess something certain about them. We proclaim that those who have died in the faith are not "on their way" to heaven. They are already there. Standing before the throne, in the presence of the Lamb, clothed in white, washed clean in His blood.

In the Roman Catholic calendar, there's a difference between All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day. All Saints' Day, November 1, is for those who the church has canonized as a saint and declared with certainty that they are in heaven already. Whereas, All Souls' Day, November 2, today actually, is for those who may still be going through the purification of purgatory. Those who have not yet arrived.

But that division doesn't exist in Scripture. The Bible doesn't ever speak of a halfway heaven. Of a holding place for the partially cleansed. Instead, what we receive is the vision of St John in our reading from Revelation 7.

He looks, and there before him is a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, tribe, people, and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They are not sitting in the outer courts of heaven. They are not off in the distance, waiting their turn. They stand before the throne, in the presence of God Himself.

And they are clothed in white robes. Not partly white. Not waiting by the washing machine for the load to finish. But fully and completely washed clean. Their sins are not in the process of being cleansed. They are forgiven, fully and finally. John writes, "*They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.*"

This is the comfort that Marge's funeral, for all its sincerity, could not proclaim. This is the comfort you and I cling to when we stand at the graves of our loved ones in Christ. Not the hollow promise of "when they get to heaven." But the certain hope that they are now before His throne. They are home.

And that same vision is meant to give hope to us, the saints still here on earth. Because the truth is, we don't always feel very saintly. We see our sins, our old regrets, harsh words, impatient hearts, the thoughts we wish we could take back. We see the world's evil and our own weakness. We know we're not yet what we should be.

And that's why we need to hear the other reading for today, from 1 John 3: "*See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are.*" Not "so we will eventually be," not "so we might be," but "so we are."

In other words, sainthood isn't just a heavenly title. It's a present identity. The same Jesus who will welcome us into heaven already calls us His own right now. By baptism, He has washed us. By faith, He has clothed us in His righteousness. By His Word and Supper, He feeds us with the same life that sustains those around His throne.

We are one communion of saints. Some in heaven, some still on earth. But all in Christ. The saints above and the saints below are not separated by a wall of purgatory, but united in one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all.

Still, John says, “*What we will be has not yet appeared.*” There is something more to come. What we are now by faith will one day be revealed by sight. We will see Him as He is, and we will be like Him.

Right now, though, that truth is often hidden. We are saints, yes... but we are also sinners. Simul justus et peccator, to use the Latin phrase: at the same time righteous and sinner. The saint is there, hidden under the sinner’s skin. And sometimes that saint can be pretty hard to see.

The devil, the world, and our sinful flesh all conspire to convince us that the sinner is all that we are. That our failures define us, that our shame is our identity, that we are no different from any other sinner condemned to hell. But that’s a lie. A cruel and ancient lie.

And that lie must be killed. That lie must be drowned. Drowned in the waters of Holy Baptism, where the Old Adam is put to death with all sins and evil desires. Every day, through contrition and repentance, we return to those waters. Every day the sinner dies, and the saint arises.

Only then, only through the death of the old and the rising of the new, can we begin to see what we will be when Christ appears. Then the truth of God’s promise breaks through all our doubts: that we are His children now, and soon we will see Him face to face.

That’s the promise of All Saints’ Day. We celebrate not only those who have gone before, but also what awaits us who follow them. And what does await us?

It’s worth noticing the contrasts in Revelation 7. The saints came out of the “great tribulation.” Out of sorrow, out of death, out of this world’s brokenness. And what do they find?

No more hunger or thirst. No more scorching heat. No more sadness or suffering at all. “*The Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and He will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.*” What began at baptism will be complete in glory. What we receive by faith now we will see face to face.

That’s not wishful thinking. Nor is it, “when we get to heaven.” It is the sure and certain promise of the God who keeps His Word.

And so, when we stand at the grave, we don’t say goodbye forever. We don’t say, “She’s gone.” We don’t even say vaguely, “She’s in a better place.” And we certainly don’t say, “She’s in purgatory, but she’ll get to heaven someday.” No, we say with confidence, “She is with Christ.”

When we kneel at the altar and receive the body and blood of Jesus, we join that same multitude around the throne. We don’t see them, but they are there. The saints above and the saints below, gathered to sing one song to one Savior who gives us this one feast.

That’s why the liturgy calls this meal a “foretaste of the feast to come.” Because in this Supper, heaven touches earth. The Lamb who feeds the saints in glory feeds us here too, and we join their eternal song: “*Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!*”

All Saints’ Day is not about those who have earned their way into the certainty of heaven through their good works. It’s not about perfect people. It’s about a perfect Savior. The saints are sinners who have been washed. They are not flawless. They are forgiven. They are holy because Christ is holy.

And that’s why this day is for us, too. For you who struggle with temptation, who mourn, who hunger and thirst for righteousness. For you who feel weak in faith or weary of this world. You belong to the same communion, the same Lord, the same victory.

You are God’s child now. You are His saint now. And one day, you will join that white-robed multitude. Not “when you get to heaven,” but the moment you close your eyes in Jesus. For, as Paul described it to the Philippians, to die is gain. To depart and be with Christ is far better. To fall asleep in the Lord is to awaken before His throne.

So today, we thank God for the saints: for Marge and for all who have died in Christ. We thank Him for the faith that joins us to them. And we look forward to that great reunion, not in some uncertain future, but in the sure hope of the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting. Amen.