

Revelation 7

9 After this I looked, and there was a great crowd that no one could number. They were from every nation, tribe, people, and language. They were standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They wore white robes and held palm branches in their hands. 10 They cried out with a loud voice:

“Victory belongs to our God
who sits on the throne,
and to the Lamb.”

11 All the angels stood in a circle around the throne, and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell facedown before the throne and worshipped God, 12 saying,

“Amen! Blessing and glory
and wisdom and thanksgiving
and honor and power and might
be to our God forever and always. Amen.”

13 Then one of the elders said to me, “Who are these people wearing white robes, and where did they come from?”

14 I said to him, “Sir, you know.”

Then he said to me, “These people have come out of great hardship. They have washed their robes and made them white in the Lamb’s blood. 15 This is the reason they are before God’s throne. They worship him day and night in his temple, and the one seated on the throne will shelter them. 16 They won’t hunger or thirst anymore. No sun or scorching heat will beat down on them, 17 because the Lamb who is in the midst of the throne will shepherd them. He will lead them to the springs of life-giving water,[a] and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

Psalms 34

I will bless the Lord at all times;
his praise will always be in my mouth.

2 I [b] praise the Lord—
let the suffering listen and rejoice.

3 Magnify the Lord with me!
Together let us lift his name up high!

4 I sought the Lord and he answered me.
He delivered me from all my fears.

5 Those who look to God will shine;
their faces are never ashamed.

6 This suffering person cried out:
the Lord listened and saved him from every trouble.

7 On every side, the Lord’s messenger protects those who honor God; and he delivers them.

8 Taste and see how good the Lord is!
The one who takes refuge in him is truly happy!

9 You who are the Lord’s holy ones, honor him,

because those who honor him don't lack a thing.
10 Even strong young lions go without and get hungry,
but those who seek the Lord lack no good thing.
22 The Lord saves his servants' lives;
all those who take refuge in him
won't be held responsible for anything.

1 John 3

See what kind of love the Father has given to us in that we should be called God's children, and that is what we are! Because the world didn't recognize him, it doesn't recognize us.

2 Dear friends, now we are God's children, and it hasn't yet appeared what we will be. We know that when he appears we will be like him because we'll see him as he is. 3 And everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself even as he is pure.

Matthew 5

1 Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up a mountain. He sat down and his disciples came to him. 2 He taught them, saying:

Happy people

3 "Happy are people who are hopeless, because the kingdom of heaven is theirs.

4 "Happy are people who grieve, because they will be made glad.

5 "Happy are people who are humble, because they will inherit the earth.

6 "Happy are people who are hungry and thirsty for righteousness, because they will be fed until they are full.

7 "Happy are people who show mercy, because they will receive mercy.

8 "Happy are people who have pure hearts, because they will see God.

9 "Happy are people who make peace, because they will be called God's children.

10 "Happy are people whose lives are harassed because they are righteous, because the kingdom of heaven is theirs.

11 "Happy are you when people insult you and harass you and speak all kinds of bad and false things about you, all because of me. 12 Be full of joy and be glad, because you have a great reward in heaven. In the same way, people harassed the prophets who came before you.

Sermon

Grace to you and peace from God our Creator, our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit: Amen.

“Happy and happy and happy and happy and oh by the way, be glad and full of joy because people are going to harass you just like the harassed the prophets. Good times!” I tell you what, sometimes the content of our faith seems just loopy. And this passage only reveals the tips of the iceberg. Revelation talks about washing robes in blood, which, according to Wikipedia, is not a suitable bleach substitute. The psalm referenced something about hungry lions and magnifying glasses, maybe? I got kind of lost. And that reading from 1 John... Yeah, sure, love is good, but we're not going to be recognizable in heaven? How can we be loved by someone if we can't be known by anyone? It's a doozy of a week in the lectionary.

So **thank God for the saints**, for all those people in our lives that highlight the meaning of our faith when we can't make any sense of it ourselves. In the midst of our confusion, with dichotomies and dissonances that make it hard to know anything about God for sure, we look instead to the saints who teach us, through their lives and their living, what our faith really means. Today, on All Saints Sunday, let's not look first to the doctrine and dogma of Christianity, but to the lives of Christians through whom we see the active light of Jesus shining in what they said and did.

First, though, a few preliminary comments are important. When we talk about the lives of the saints, we aren't worshipping them. They're not God. Instead, we're saying that we see God at work through the prisms of their lives, both in the beauty of the glass and the refractions through the brokenness. The lives of the saints highlight the presence of God in our world and point us to the fullness of

God's Kingdom. Also, when we talk about saints, we're not talking about perfect people. These are people that have made mistakes, sometimes terrible ones. We're not pretending that they're better than anyone else by sharing stories today, or that we should ignore their faults, but instead pointing out just how good God is because God's willing to do such good things through such otherwise broken people. As Lutherans, we remember always that saints are sinners, and sinners are saints. There's no fundamental difference between St. Teresa of Avila, your "unique" Aunt Mable who makes her own clothes and your boisterous coworker Terrance whose favorite conversation topic is early 20th century baseball statistics. Each is a sinner and a saint saved by the grace of God.

One of the wonderful things about saints is that their lives can help make otherwise confusing pieces of scripture come to life in meaningful ways. Let me tell you about a

few saints that have impressed me, and impressed upon me the importance of God in their lives. Despite language about washing robes in blood from Revelation – which actually is a theological claim about our purity being found in the death and resurrection of Jesus – it seems the trajectory of it is God's faithfulness through our hardship. My grandma Doris was one who knew all about God's faithfulness in the middle of hardship. Grandma Doris smoked her way to lung cancer by 1985, while I was just an infant, when she was given six months to live. She eventually died...twenty years later in 2005. Doctors had no explanation for the cancer's disappearance, and though it was complications from having only one lung that eventually took her life, she counted those twenty years as tangible signs of God's grace despite her choices that hurt her own body. Throughout those two decades she refused to hold a cigarette in her hands and instead held her

grandchildren and great grandchildren, and taught us to hold faith in our hands as well. God led her to springs of life giving water, and wiped away every tear from her eye.

Thank God for the saints who show us what God can do not just for us, but sometimes despite us.

The Psalm today talks about always blessing the Lord, which seems incredibly difficult in the midst of the terrible struggles faced by so many people we know. Yet, I'm fortunate enough to know Tricia, an African-American woman who was our neighbor while we lived in Durham, NC. She and her husband Tony care for both children and grandchildren in their home despite the fact that Tony has multiple sclerosis. Tony couldn't work regularly because of his illness and the demands on Tricia to care for him and everyone else in the household made it nearly impossible for Tricia to keep a stable job. As gentrification took over the neighborhood, rent went up to the point where they

couldn't afford to stay in their home. And every day, every time I saw Tricia, you know what she said? "God's faithful, Drew. Don't you worry 'bout anything. I'm not." I don't understand that depth of faith. I really don't, but thank God for the saints who show us what it means to always bless the Lord.

In 1 John 3, we hear about hope for transformation, that we, the children of God, will become more and more like God, so much so that we may not recognize ourselves at first. No one I've known lived this hope more radically than Dr. Susan Keefe, one of my professors at Duke Divinity School. Dr. Keefe was a devout Catholic who was deeply committed to experiencing God's presence in the sacraments, and particularly, in the Eucharist. For many years later in life, the only food she ate every day was the bread and wine at communion during daily Mass. She'd drink fluids, but the only solid food she'd put in her body was

that bread of heaven, trusting that the presence of God within would change her from the inside out. She looked nothing like any other professor at the Div School, both physically and in her teaching and even in her spirituality, and you might not have recognized her slight body and meek demeanor as one of the scholastic giants in her area, though she surely was. Yet, she lived a life that radically trusted the presence of God was all that she needed not just to live, but to thrive. Thank God for the saints who show us the tangible potential of hope in God.

Matthew's words today refer to the blessings, the joy that we receive from God despite the struggles and harassment we face in the world. Now, the word happy here sounds a bit shallow, as though it means simply smiling while you've got deep pain inside. But the Greek word *makarios* means something more. We remember this in other translation as blessed, which is closer, but that gets

away from the personal experience. Someone does the blessing to us. Happy is a feeling within. Perhaps the best translation of this word is fortunate. Fortunate are the hopeless, fortunate are those who grieve, fortunate are the humble. Because, you see, fortunate carries both senses of a personal experience and an external giver. We receive a fortune, and from that gift, we feel fortunate.

This all reminds me of St. Thecla, an early female apostle who traveled with Paul during some of his missionary journeys. She lived a happy life amidst harassment, for she saw herself as fortunate to be a friend of God who was called to welcome others to experience God's friendship. She was compelled by Paul's teaching, became a Christian, and was so devoted to God's purpose that she committed to chastity so that she might fully give herself to Jesus and the Gospel. As a woman in the 1st century, though, to deny sex and refuse marriage was a radical

thing, and so she was condemned to be burned at the stake. A storm arose, however, that miraculously saved her from her fate. Once again, she denied a nobleman's sexual advances and was once again sentenced to be eaten by wild beasts. Yet, while in the arena, the female beasts fought off the male ones, saving her and her vow before God from the unwanted advances of men. Talk about girl power! Thecla counted herself fortunate in the Gospel, and lived out the rest of her days happy in the face of harassment because God called her to a holy life. Yet, even after her death, the harassment didn't stop, for icons like this one that showed her as an equal to Paul were defaced in alter centuries by men looking to protect their privilege and power in the church. Fortunately for us, and for Thecla, a few icons survived, as did the 2nd century text that recorded her ministry, so we see how happy, how blessed, how fortunate she was, and is, in the life of faith. Thank God for

the saints who show us what it's like to live a fortunate life, happy amidst harassment.

While Tricia is still alive, the rest of these saints have since died, and so today during the prayers we will read their names aloud along with a litany of others that you'll submit in the offering plate. We'll remember them all before God, not because they're perfect, but because through them, we saw a glimpse of God's perfection. We'll remember that, not because they're holy in themselves, but because God's holiness came alive in their lives.

Thank God for the saints whose lives guide us to the cross, whose witness points to the Savior who gave them such a wonderful life. Thank God for the saints whose lives lead us to life in Christ. We read their names because their names are written in the Lamb's Book of Life. We read their names because their robes are washed in the blood of Jesus, made clean and pure not of their own actions, but of

God's action in Jesus. Thank God for all those saints, and remember, that you too are saints, and your names are in that book as well. Amen.