

November 1, 2020 All Saints Sunday
Rev. Jen Nagel, University Lutheran Church of Hope

Revelation 7:9-17, 1 John 3:1-3
Matthew 5:1-12

[Working Preacher Commentary on Revelations 7:9-17 by Barbara Rossing for this date]

Grace and peace to you, Beloved Saints of God. Amen.

We'll light candles soon, but first, let us dwell a moment with the Word.

Who are these?

That's the question the elder asks in the midst of our reading from Revelation this morning.

Who are these? Who is this multitude envisioned standing before God?

Crying and singing and praising?

From every nation, from all the tribes and people and languages? Who are these?

Revelation is filled with plenty of harsh and confusing bits that leave many of us uncertain.

But in this section, there is a little respite, a pause from the destruction, a lovely vision of how it can be.

Revelation scholar Barbara Rossing calls this passage a "salvation interlude."

I love that image, we can all use a little *salvation interlude* in the worst of it.

Who are these? As John tells it, these are people who belong to the lamb's multitude.

They've come through the great ordeal, the tribulation.

In their time, when the politics of almighty Rome has been so hot, so conflicted,

when these diverse communities have been so marginalized socially and economically and religiously

because they've dared say No to the Roman imperial system,

then John harkens back to the exile, years earlier, and gives them a vision of returning home.

It's a vision of shelter and protection, even in the wilderness,

where hunger and thirst will be no more,

where tears will be wiped away.

Friends in Christ, we know something about ordeals.

We know something about hot politics and marginalization.

We know something about systems of oppression that are, frankly, hard to squelch.

And we know something of exile, being sent away from our routines and rhythms,

our schools and work and worship spaces,

our physical interactions and community and ones we love.

These are incredibly difficult times, and growing more difficult, it often seems, by the day.

The Saturday newspaper reports that more than 1.2 million people have died worldwide from COVID, 228,701 in the US, and 3,165 in Minnesota.

As these numbers rise and the sheer gravity of this season shrouds us, this question is all the more important: Who are these?

Who are these numbers? Who are these often-faceless statistics?

These are saints of God, known or not-so-known, held in the wide, wide mercy of the shepherd.

Hungry and thirsty no longer, tears finally wiped dry, at peace, at rest.

Who are these?

In-person or not, on All Saints Sunday we have a chance to answer that question ourselves:

Who are these?

Today we name aloud those who have died this year, tolling the bell, lighting the candles.

And when the light is already bright, we light still more flames, a multitude of lights,

conjuring the names, the faithfulness, the stories, the struggle,

the living and dying of so many who have gone before us.

We name our thanks, we mark our grief and, at once, we claim our hope in Christ Jesus.

Some of you stopped by the All Saints Vigil here at church yesterday.

There is still time this afternoon and again tomorrow.

The candles are abundant—it's beautiful.

On the rail around our communion table, just like always, there are the names of those members of

University Lutheran Church of Hope who have joined the saints eternal this year.

Who are these in the multitude?

Their names visually remind us that they are with us at the table, the communion table and every table,

joining in this rich meal, this foretaste of the feast to come.

Over the last weeks, many of you have sent in names and pictures to include in the list of our saints.

Often you've added a note or even a story.

Who are these? They are a spouse, a parent or grandparent, a sibling, a child or grandchild.

They are a special aunt or uncle, or cousin,

a colleague, a mentor or teacher.

They are friends with whom we have laughed and cried.

They are the faithful, with whom we've prayed and labored, next to whom we tasted forgiveness.
They are next door neighbors, and community and civic leaders, sometimes unsuspecting.
George Floyd is included and a few of the many who have been killed at the hands of those we hoped
would protect.

With some of these, our relationships have been fraught,
and yet today we remember them.

As 1st John says we are children of God, and they are children of God.

Here's the thing, dear friends: the saints are both the dead AND the living.

Simultaneously saint and sinner, you and me, and so many others, loved mightily by God, held gently in
death like we are held in life.

It's a little too easy to close our eyes to one another, especially now, when anxieties are high,
when divisions cut deep and wide.

At these time we could run for the hills, and it's tempting, I know.

Rather, dear ones, look around and ask that question we hear first in Revelation: Who are these?
Find out, really find out, what do they care about? who do they love? what do they value, and why?

In recent weeks, I've found some of my most grounding and meaningful times in worship have been
pausing and looking at you:

seeing your tear streaked faces, your bowed heads, your shining eyes, your hunger, your yearning.
last week glimpsing our confirmation students and their families direct from their living rooms,
back in early October on blessing of animals Sunday seeing you snuggling cats and dogs.

Honestly, that's when I've felt the most connected to God and to you,

when I dared ask "Who are these?"

and then through my tears to wait long enough to catch a glimpse of you.

We'll move now into naming our saints.

Between sets of names there is a line of music, join in.

At the end there'll be space to name still more of your saints, and to light candles.

Who are these?

We know, O God, we know, these are the beloved saints

Grant them eternal rest, O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon them.

Amen.