

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 in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands.¹⁰ And they cried out in a loud voice:

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

¹¹ *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,¹² saying:*

*“Amen!
Praise and glory
and wisdom and thanks and honor
and power and strength
be to our God for ever and ever.
Amen!”*

¹³ *Then one of the elders asked me, “These in white robes—who are they, and where did they come from?”*

¹⁴ *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.¹⁵ 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 spread his tent over them.*

¹⁶ *Never again will they hunger;
never again will they thirst.*

*The sun will not beat upon them,
nor any scorching heat.*

¹⁷ *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 7:9-17)

What is the Church?

What did you do last night? Did you go trick or treating? Did you collect a mountain of candy? Are you going to share it with your pastor? Did you stay at home and pass out candy to the kids who came to your door? Did you turn off all the lights and go somewhere else because you don't want to have anything to do with Halloween? Halloween has become one of the biggest holidays of the year in America. And it has become a huge adult holiday. In the neighborhood north of church, there are houses that go all out with decorations and the adults dress up in scary costumes and put on a kind of show. Retailors make a fortune on this holiday.

What's it all about? Would it surprise you to learn that this holiday has a religious origin? Now, I'm not going to get into the debate about pagan origins. The word "Halloween" is a contraction of the expression "All Hallows Eve." What is that? Well, it's kind of like Christmas Eve or New Year's Eve. It's the evening before the holiday of All Hallows or as we have it in our bulletin, All Saints. November 1 is All Saints Day, a holiday in the church year that reminds us that we are one people of God who serve him here on earth and also in heaven. In other words, we are the Church of God. In our sermon text for this morning, John saw a vision of that Church. He shared it with us because we live in a world in which it's hard for us to see what we really are. It's easy for us to become frustrated with congregational politics and financial problems and lack of interest.

It's easy for us to feel like what happens in here doesn't have much to do with my life out there. So God showed John this vision. We want to study this vision by asking a question: **what is the Church?**

I.

John saw the answer: **It's a great multitude of believers.** John says, **"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 in front of the Lamb."** What does this vision mean? Well, the multitude is wearing white robes and holding palm branches in their hands. Does that remind you of Palm Sunday when the crowd waved palm branches at Jesus? This crowd is gathered around the throne of God and around the Lamb, who, of course, is Jesus. This is the Holy Christian Church, the assembly of all believers.

They are a great multitude that no one can count. Now, God does know exactly how many believers there have been and how many there will be. But we don't. We can only guess. But God says we are many. Now there are other places in the Bible that call the church a little flock and few in number. How can both things be true? Well, it's a question of perspective. At any given time and place, the believers are usually in the minority. Today, we certainly feel like the church is retreating. The percentage of Americans who identify themselves as Christians is going down. It feels like Islam and outright unbelief are growing faster and threaten to swamp the Church and wipe us out. But when those moments of sadness and fear threaten to overwhelm us, when the Church is defeated and dragged through the mud and stomped on by the unbelievers all around us, that's when we need to see this vision: God has gathered before him all the believers of every time and place. Altogether we are great multitude that only God can count.

And we come from every nation, tribe, people and language. When we think of Christians, don't we tend to think of Europeans and North and South Americans? That isn't the whole story and it never was. Egypt and the north coast of Africa were once entirely Christian. The church is growing in Africa again. In the 1600's, there was a thriving Christian church in Japan. It was exterminated by persecution, but today, there are Christians in Japan again. They probably feel even more like a little flock than we do, but they are part of this great multitude. Today, Christianity is growing in places like China and India and Nepal. Sometimes, it has to stay under the radar because the government is hostile to it. But it's there. Russia, after almost a century of official atheism, has many Christian churches, including Lutherans. Even countries like Saudi Arabia and Iran have Christian churches. They have a very tough time and we need to remember them in our prayers, but God has gathered those believers.

When we gather in heaven, the assembly of all believers of every time and place will not be all white people. We might not even be the majority. It won't be made up primarily of people who spoke English on this earth and shared our American tastes in food and music and TV shows. The gospel is gathering the elect from every nation under heaven. That's what Jesus said would happen. He said the gospel must first be preached to all nations, and then the end will come. John saw that fulfilled long before it was true. It is largely true today.

So even if the church in America dies, God will not let the Church die. It will always be here. Everywhere that the gospel is preached, people will come to faith. Why? Well, you see that in the song that the multitude sings: **"Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb."** Now, in one sense salvation does belong to us: God gave it to us and we have it. But it is only ours because he gives it. And he gives it where and when he pleases. He gives it to all the world because Jesus died and paid for all the world. He gives it through the gospel that creates faith in our hearts. So we sing his praises now and forever.

This is something that finally, we can only grasp by faith. Sometimes, we get to see what God is doing. When our children stand up here and sing God's praises, we see the salvation that belongs to God and to Christ. When we receive new members into our church, we see the salvation that God gives. But sometimes, those children grow up and stop coming to church and drift away from us. Sometimes, active members of our churches commit terrible sins and refuse to repent and even get excommunicated. Sometimes, churches shrink in membership until they can't keep their doors open. At those moments, it's hard to see God giving faith.

But salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne and to the Lamb. We trust that our God is working even when we don't understand how things play out in our congregation or even in our country. We trust the power of the gospel because we trust in Jesus who loved us and died for us and rose for us. His death washed our sins away and it proved that God loves us no matter what. His resurrection gives us life and it proved that he has the power to overcome death and sin and unbelief. He has the power to create a great

multitude of believers from every nation under heaven. You and I are a part of that great multitude of all who trust in Jesus in every time and place, on earth and in heaven, the Holy Christian Church.

II.

In the vision, John saw that multitude in heaven, around the throne of God, singing in the choir, because that's the one thing that God tells us we'll be doing in heaven. One of the elders, the figures in the vision that stand for the leaders of the Church, asked John, "**These in white robes—who are they, and where did they come from?**" John doesn't pretend to know. So the elder tells him, "**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.**" He's talking about us after we go to heaven! **What is the Church? It's all those who have come out of the great tribulation.**

What is the great tribulation? Some people have misunderstood this to mean some great trial that will come just before the end of the world. But the Bible never says that. Rather, the great tribulation is just life. Life here hurts. Why? Because sin has broken our world and our lives. When Adam and Eve disobeyed God, there were consequences. The most obvious was death. Every human being dies. And now, God has allowed things to flourish in this world that cause death. Adam and Eve never heard of cancer or small pox or tidal waves. There were no earthquakes in the Garden of Eden and there was no fire department or hospital either, because there was nothing there could hurt or kill people. But sin brought God's judgment, and that included all those natural things that cause us to die.

Sin changed us. It made us into rebels. We pass our sin down from generation to generation. Not only are we all born at war with God, we're born at war with each other. Human greed and selfishness is the cause of the greatest pains and sorrows that people suffer here. We chase all the wrong things and spend our lives frustrated and angry and depressed. The people we love disappoint us over and over again and we can't let go of it. War and crime and gossip and slander poison our lives. All that makes this world the great tribulation. Even the happiest and most blessed of us here suffer the results of their own sins.

But Jesus pulls us out of that great tribulation. How? By his blood. We washed our robes in the blood of the Lamb and now they're clean! Think of the worst stain you ever got on an expensive piece of clothing. You couldn't bleach it, because that would ruin it. You tried dry-cleaning it, but they couldn't get the stain out. You had ruined it. That's what your sin does to you. We are filthy, stained, ruined by a lifetime of sin. But Jesus has dipped our lives into his blood and instantly, all the stain is gone! Our robes are white! We are perfect in God's sight. So we will be pulled out of this great tribulation. In place of a world that's tormented by war and hatred and violence, we will live in the temple of God, in peace and safety. In place of hurt and loss and defeat, God will spread his tent over us and we will have healing and riches and protection. God will wipe every tear from our eyes and lead us to springs of living water. We will live with Jesus and he will care for us forever.

The elder said, "**Therefore, they are before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple.**" What service will we render God in heaven? We see him serving us here. We will never hunger or thirst or have the sun beat down on us again. We will never be hurt or sad. We will never die again. All that is what God does for us. What service will we render him? Nothing but praise. We will sing to God in joy for all that he has done for us. We will recount the gospel message over and over again. That's the only service we ever see the saints in heaven render to God anywhere in the book of Revelation – really anywhere in Scripture. Because the truth is, God doesn't need anything from us. But he loves us and he created us to serve him. We will be happiest in heaven when we do that.

And even here, we are happiest when we remember that God created us to serve him. We serve him by serving each other. By sharing the good news with the lost. By encouraging each other to stand firm. By teaching our children to know the Lord. By helping each other when life hurts. By standing together as one people of God until our Savior returns. By lifting up our voices and singing to our Savior here.

That is who we are. All that is what All Saints celebrates. It celebrates the people of God being one with their Savior forever. And it celebrates our service to our Lord and to one another. Through a long and debated process, All Saints Eve has become Halloween, a time to dress up and pass out candy, and a time to watch scary movies and go to haunted houses. There may be some truth to the idea that that part of the holiday reflects pagan ideas breaking through. But the Christian celebration always included the idea of remembering the saints who went before us and who even laid down their lives for the faith. That remembrance of the dead

may have been twisted into something else. If so, that reminds us again, that this is the great tribulation where nothing goes perfectly. But whatever we did yesterday for Halloween, however you feel about that civic holiday, today we have gathered to remember that Christ made us his Church. We are a great multitude from every nation under heaven. And we will come out of this great tribulation and we will praise him with all our hearts forever. Amen.