

If the average person knows anything about the book of Revelation, they probably know something about all the disasters and hardship that come toward the end of the world. They might know of the four horsemen of the apocalypse, or the various disasters as God's judgment unfolds, or the great dragon and the beasts who serve him.

Yet Revelation isn't all doom and gloom. In fact, it's a story of triumph, of God's great, final victory over evil. And most comforting of all, it's the story of how the Lord brings His people through the darkness and lets them share in His great victory, a victory without end. That victory is what we hear of today, what we rejoice in and give thanks to God for, as we remember all the saints.

As St. John beholds the glorious scene in Revelation 7, one of many throughout the book, he hears a cry, a shout echoing throughout the heavens: "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" Over and over the words ring out from the mouths of a white-robed host, one too large for John, or any man, to number.

And in reply, the vast array of angels, elders, and the four living creatures fall on their faces and sound forth: "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen!" Back and forth the call goes out, cries of joyful worship that those present never tire of, shouts that make the heavens ring and yet which do not deafen or garble.

The saints, angels, and all the hosts of heaven endlessly cry out these words first and foremost because they're all true. Salvation does belong to God and to the Lamb, who is also God. He alone is holy. He alone is perfect. He alone is good. As St. James reminds us, "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change." All good things – blessing, glory, wisdom, thanksgiving, honor, power, might – they are all from Him and they are all due to Him. To be in His presence is to experience peace and joy beyond what our tongues can express in this life.

The shouts of all those in white robes tell us another wonderful truth about our God. They tell us that our God doesn't keep all these wonderful things for Himself. He shares His overwhelming goodness with those whom He has created.

Remember, those in the white-robed host confess: salvation belongs to God. Not one man or woman in that multitude was there because he or she deserved it. No one could work their way into the glorious presence of God, for as the Bible plainly says, all people have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

We inherit the sin of our forefather Adam from the moment we are conceived, and we add to that sin with sins of our own, breaking the Commandments of God, doing what the Law says we must not do and failing to do what it says we must do. So entrapped in sin are we that, as St. Paul writes, even our best and highest works are like filthy rags before the holy God.

But God has come to wash away that filth and to give us His holiness. Salvation belongs to Him, and He chooses from His grace and mercy to share it with sinners like you and I. He accomplishes this, as we noted last week, by taking our sins upon Himself at the cross and in return granting us His righteousness.

This is seen also in Revelation, where the Lamb – Jesus – is described as standing, even though it appears to have been slain. That pictures Christ’s death and resurrection. Even in glory, Jesus still bears those wounds, like He showed to St. Thomas the Sunday after the first Easter. Could He have healed them, made them disappear, by His great power? Of course! But He chose not to, that we might know that the salvation won for us by those wounds remains forever. As Isaiah proclaimed, by His stripes we are healed. And healed not just in some limited way. By the blood of the Lamb washing away our sins, our Lord is sanctifying us – making us holy.

When He declared through Moses, “You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy,” this held a two-fold meaning. To be with God, we must be holy. Sin cannot abide in God’s presence. Darkness has no place with light. This is the Law.

But at the same time, these words of God are a promise of the Gospel. Because He is our God, He will make us holy as He is holy. As His people, the Lord will cause us to reflect Him, to be His holy ones. That’s what the word “saint” means, after all: “holy one.”

This being made holy, made one of His saints, is something that He does or begins in this life. At the beginning of Revelation 7, the part not in your bulletin this morning, we hear of God sealing His servants, marking them as His own. “Then I saw another angel ascending from the rising of the sun, with the seal of the living God, and he called with a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to harm earth and sea, saying, ‘Do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees, until we have sealed the servants of our God on their foreheads.’”

In this part of Revelation, we’re told about the believers who are on the earth. They are still facing the troubles that come with living in this world, illustrated by dangers to earth and sea. Yet these Christians, including us, they are not left to struggle on their own. They are sealed by God. He puts His mark, even His holy name, on them.

St. Paul writes in Ephesians: “In [Christ] you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.”

The Holy Spirit seals people through the word of truth. This takes place in Holy Baptism, where, according to God’s promise, people are given new lives, joined to the death and resurrection of Christ, and made a part of the household of God Himself. That’s why, in the Baptismal rite, the one being baptized is marked with the sign of the cross upon his forehead and upon his heart, to mark him as one sealed by Christ.

Baptism gives great assurance, because though it might be done through human hands, it is God Himself, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who is at work. The angel brings the seal to those in Revelation, but it is the power of God manifested in the seal.

In addition to Holy Baptism, God the Holy Spirit also brings His seal through the word of truth when it is heard. In the early church, this was seen in all those martyrs who were put to death before they could be baptized. They had heard the word of truth, and so the Spirit had sealed them, marking them as children of God and guaranteeing their salvation, even though they died before they could be baptized as they had desired.

This is also true for those children of Christian parents who are called by the Lord to His side before we have a chance to meet them outside the womb. We know that children hear and respond to words even while inside their mothers. This is seen in ultrasounds, or in the kicks that come when big brothers tell the baby to come out and play.

Even more so, it's seen in the Holy Scriptures themselves, when John the Baptist, who is roughly six months along, leaps for joy at the sound of the Virgin Mary's greeting to Elizabeth. And John is leaping at the presence of Jesus Christ, heralded by that sound, even though Jesus would have been microscopic at that point. The Scriptures make it clear that the word of God can and does bring faith to the unborn who hear it, even if science would tell us that the baby isn't far enough along to hear in the physical sense.

And remember, if the deaf can hear the words of Jesus and have their ears opened, and if the dead can hear the words of Jesus and come out of their tombs, then certainly the unborn can hear the words of Jesus and be sealed and saved.

All who are sealed by God are known by Him, as the Scriptures show us in Revelation. They are numbered, ordered. It's like an army – which is why we call the Church on earth the Church Militant – everyone has their position, and they are all known to their great Lord and Captain. That's the meaning of the 144,000. Not that there will only be that many people in heaven, but that every single Christian on earth is accounted for by Christ. As Jesus says, He knows even the number of hairs on their heads.

And as He also proclaims, “And this is the will of Him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that He has given Me, but raise it up on the last day.” The Lord knows them and has sealed them, such that, even when He allows the forces of destruction to be set loose, they will not be separated from Him. They are His holy ones, His saints, upon the earth.

This glorious truth is witnessed by St. John in the next scene he observes. He writes that he sees a great multitude that no one could number.

Before we get into the description of those in the multitude, let's note something else about them. John writes, “Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, ‘Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?’ I said to him, ‘Sir, you know.’ And he said to me, ‘These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.’”

This multitude has come out of the great tribulation. Is the elder here speaking of the period of great suffering and persecution that Christ foretold will take place shortly before His return in glory? It would include that, for sure. But I'd say the “great tribulation” spoken of here includes any of the

suffering endured by Christians in this life. Jesus tells His disciples that in this world, they will have tribulation, and all who follow Him certainly do experience this.

Sin brings all manner of suffering into our lives, suffering in body, in mind, in spirit. Those who do not know Christ, whose minds are darkened by sin, persecute Christians in all sorts of different ways, some by minor annoyances, others with murderous acts, and everything in between. And finally, sin's ultimate effect is experienced in death. The old and the young, the foolish and the wise, all are finally laid in the grave by sin. Being in this world of great tribulation, it would seem that the saints, those sealed by Christ, and overcome by sin and death.

But the truth is, in fact, the opposite. Christ has overcome sin, and broken the power of death. Through the Lamb's victorious sacrifice, He has transformed death from being a fall into crushing darkness into a doorway leading to glorious light. None of Christ's army of saints, numbered and ordered, are ever overcome by sin and the devil. The only way they fall is by surrendering themselves.

But for those who remain fighting, there is only victory. As Christ declares to His saints elsewhere in Revelation, "Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life." When a Christian dies, he isn't lost, for Christ loses none of whom the Father has given Him. No, at that moment, when one sealed by Christ dies, the Lord sends His holy angels to bring that blessed saint to be with Him in paradise.

The Liar and Deceiver would want us to believe that death is his victory, but with every Christian who dies, another person is removed from his reach forever. Every Christian funeral is a proclamation that the Good Shepherd has brought another one of His sheep from this vale of tears to His green pastures and still waters in heaven.

This is true for any and all who fall asleep believing in Jesus. The white-robed host includes men and women from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages. The patriarchs and prophets are there. The apostles and evangelists. The Old Testament Christians, who died looking forward to the coming of the promised Messiah. The New Testament Christians, who died knowing that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah, God in human flesh.

Christians who were used by the Lord for great deeds of blessing, whom we honor with the title, "Saint." And Christians who lived out their faith in meekness, whose names are forgotten by history by who are never forgotten by their Lord.

The angels bear up those who have fought long and hard, who hear the voice of the Father declare, "Well done, good and faithful servant! Enter into the joy of your master!" And the angels gently carry the little ones to the arms of Jesus, being spared the suffering of the tribulation and knowing only the peace of God.

All those in heaven wear the white robe of Christ's righteousness, all sin completely wiped away from them. And all the effects of sin, and living in a world broken by sin, are gone as well. In their place is only goodness, joy, peace, fulfillment, gladness.

They wave palm branches, signs of life and victory that are given them by Christ. Their mouths are filled with words of praise and worship, for there is no longer anything to mourn or weep over. The

Good Shepherd, who is also the Lamb, has brought them through the valley of the shadow of death into the house of the Lord, and there they will dwell forever.

Salvation belongs to our God, and this day we give thanks for all those to whom He has freely given that salvation, both in this life and in the life to come. We give thanks for all the saints, who from their labors rest. Thy name, O Jesus, be forever blessed. Alleluia! Amen.