

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
Saints Triumphant
November 5, 2023
Sermon by Pastor Christopher Pflughoeft
Fervently focus on the future

⁹ After these things I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people, and language, standing in front of the throne and of the Lamb, clothed with white robes, and with palm branches in their hands. ¹⁰ They called out with a loud voice and said: Salvation comes from our God, who sits on the throne, and from the Lamb. ¹¹ All the angels stood around the throne, the elders, and the four living creatures. They fell on their faces before the throne and worshipped God, ¹² saying: Amen. Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and might belong to our God forever and ever. Amen. ¹³ One of the elders spoke to me and said, “These people dressed in white robes, who are they and where did they come from?” And I answered him, “Sir, you know.”

¹⁴ And he said to me: These are the ones who are coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. ¹⁵ Because of this they are in front of the throne of God, and they serve him day and night in his temple. He who sits on the throne will spread his tent over them. ¹⁶ They will never be hungry or thirsty ever again. The sun will never beat upon them, nor will 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

So by God's grace it came to pass
That they true priests were rendered.
Themselves they offered at the last,
And Christ's own priesthood entered.
Unto the world they died indeed,
Hypocrisy renouncing,
And came to heaven, pure and free,
All monkish ways denouncing,
Forsaking all men's trifles.

This is stanza six of Martin Luther's first hymn, “A New Song Now Shall Be Begun.” Luther wrote this twelve-stanza hymn as a response and reflection upon the death of the first two Lutheran martyrs.

On July 1, 1523, two monks in Brussels were condemned to death following their unwillingness to recant their belief and confession of the truth of the gospel. In their condemnation, these two monks, Hendrik Voes and Jan van den Esschen, went through a process called degradation. In front of the altar at church they were dressed in black and yellow vestments, they had the sacramental elements ceremonially taken from their hands, and they had their hands cut with glass to communicate that they were not “true priests.”

Voes and van den Esschen were then taken to be burned at the stake. Eyewitnesses agree that there was a strange approach to flame for these two. They were not scared. In the flames, these men sang the Te deum (We Praise You O God) which we sang in church. They also confessed the Apostles' Creed. Finally, they cried out, “Lord Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on us.”

Voes and van den Esschen died with confidence because of the Reformation truth. God gave them confidence in the gospel of Jesus Christ. They could withstand the current tribulation because of the future glory that awaited them in Jesus.

These two martyrs operate as examples in faith for us. As you live in this time between, the time between Jesus' ascension and return, focus your eyes on the cross and your future. As you live through the current tribulation, the eternal hope in Jesus gives you the confidence to continue. Therefore, I say to you, **fervently focus on the future.**

Because of the apocalyptic nature of the Revelation of Jesus Christ to St. John, people can feel nervous about studying this book of the Bible. Although such apprehensions can be understandable, navigating Revelation does require a large degree of Old Testament literacy, yet this book ought not scare you. Instead, Jesus gave this word to his church for comfort and confidence. Revelation is the victory song of the church. Jesus won. You have victory in him. During the time in between, this is a wonderful message to receive.

Today, we pick up with a vision of a scene of heaven that Jesus gave to St. John. In heaven, John saw a great multitude of people. So many that no one could count. Many, many people from the creation of life until Judgment Day are saved by Jesus. Those that John sees are from many different nations, tribes, and people groups. Yet, they all

have this in common. They are clothed in white robes. These are the robes of Christ's righteousness. These people were cleansed by the blood of Jesus who was slain for them. The people that John sees in heaven are those who look to Jesus in faith. Through faith, they received what he merited through his perfect life and innocent death on the cross.

The saints in heaven, those who were saved by God, testified that very thing. John heard them say, "Salvation comes from our God, who sits on the throne, and from the Lamb." Their testimony is true. Salvation comes from our God. Those who look to Jesus in faith do not receive the punishment they deserve. Instead, they are brought to the eternal paradise in God's presence, heaven.

In John's description of heaven, two points that may be confusing are who the elders are and what the four living creatures that surround the throne are. Further clarification comes from going back a few chapters to Revelation 4. There, John saw another scene in heaven. There were 24 elders. The 24 elders represented the Old and New Testament church. Think 12 tribes of Israel and 12 apostles. All people of all time who looked to Jesus in faith are saved. The living creatures come from the book of the prophet Ezekiel. In Ezekiel, these living creatures were cherubim, a specific type of angel.

In John's vision of heaven, all who were there worshiped God. They proclaimed his worthiness. One of those elders who worshiped God asked John who the people in white robes were. John told the elder, "You know."

The elder then told John who they were. These were those who came out of the great tribulation and washed their robes in the blood of the lamb. So, what is the great tribulation? The great tribulation is the suffering here in this life that is experienced by all Christians. Although they had trouble in this life, they were now standing around Jesus' throne in heaven. Why? Because Jesus lived and died for them.

The suffering of this earthly life was over for those in the white robes. They were now in God's presence in heaven. This is the greatest joy to consider in heaven; to be with God forever. The troubles of this life were gone as well. This is another blessing. They no longer thirsted, hungered, or had the sun beat down upon them. They no longer had the tears of sorrow. Also, they were surrounded by the heavenly host. With them, were the fellow people of God. Here, John received a beautiful vision of heaven.

What is the main point of the message that was just given to us from John that he received from Jesus that I want you to take away? **Fervently focus on the future.** You are those who are dressed in the white robes. You are those who were washed by the blood of the lamb. One day, you will stand around the throne of God and worship him in heaven. You and all believers of all time.

Currently, you experience pain and sorrow. Currently, you suffer from the consequences of sin in this world. Currently, you are going through the great tribulation. Yet, **fervently focus on the future.** Jesus has won the victory for you. You will be with your God forever in paradise.

As you go through this great tribulation, do you keep your eyes fervently fixed on the future? There was a third man with those two martyrs on July 1, 1523. The suffering caused him to give in and give up. Do you allow these current sufferings to cause you to despair, forsaking your hope or even your God? Perhaps your situation isn't in the face of literal death, but perhaps the current suffering makes you wonder if God really has the power to save you eternally.

Does the news of cancer make you wonder if God really will bring you to his presence in heaven? Does the death of a loved one make you wonder if God really would bring you and them to paradise? Does a current issue make you wonder if God really can bring you to peace in heaven? Does going through the great tribulation make you question God's power and love?

If you struggle with such doubts and fears, listen to the message that Jesus gave to his church amidst the trials and suffering of this life. The message of Revelation is a message of His victory. Jesus Christ is the lamb who was slain. He shed his blood for you on the cross. His blood has washed you clean. He clothed you in his righteousness. One day, he will take you home to heaven to be with him. Therefore, amid this time in between, **fervently focus on the future.** Jesus has secured a wonderful future for you and all believers. Those who look to Jesus in faith are those who surround the throne in heaven singing God's praises.

Today, we celebrate Saints Triumphant Sunday. This is the time in the church in which we remember those who have gone before us to be with God. When believers die, their souls go to be with God in heaven. They are free from this life of suffering. In this past year, God has brought home to himself the souls of (look up those who died in our church). What confidence to know that they are the Saints Triumphant! One day, God will take you to be with him as well.

Consider your loved ones who died in the Lord. You will be able to see them once again. In Jesus, you will join them in heaven. One day, you will be able to see them again body and soul. On the last day, Jesus will raise us and all the dead. He will transform us into our immortal glorified bodies. We, with them, will live in the new heavens and the new earth. There, we will be with our God forever, in paradise, where there is no more suffering or pain, only joy and bliss.

On this Saints Triumphant Sunday, we are overjoyed to know that we will see our loved ones again. Let us also think about our loved ones that are still alive. Parents of young children, hand over to your children the truth that is powerful to save. Yes, proclaim to them Jesus so they too can be with us in heaven. Relatives to those who have strayed, persistently pray for them. Then, share with them the message of God's Word. All of us, **focus yourselves on the future**. Do not allow the current troubles to overtake you. Instead, go to the source of strength that God gives you. Read his word and receive his sacrament.

Henrik Voes and Jan van den Esschen were asked to die for the sake of the gospel. They were able to bear through it with the confidence of Jesus and a **focus on the future**. This life certainly is not easy, yet God gets you through it. Amid the great tribulation of the time in between, **ferverly focus on your future**. You have the sure hope of eternity in heaven with Jesus. Amen.