

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod  
Saints Triumphant  
November 6, 2022  
Sermon by Pastor Jon D. Buchholz  
***That was the old way***

—Revelation 21:1-6

Let's start this morning by taking a few moments to count our blessings. You and I are very blessed people in this life! We spent the night last night in a warm bed under a dry roof. We got up and got cleaned up, perhaps took a warm shower, put on some nice clothes, got into a nice car, came into a welcoming church, were greeted by friendly people. We listen to beautiful music, join to sing beautiful songs. We are surrounded by Christians who encourage us and pray for us. We relish hearing the voice of God in his Word. We enjoy the bounty of food on our tables, gainful employment, good health, peaceful retirement. This doesn't even scratch the surface! The fact is, we can't even begin to list all the blessings we enjoy!

Think of the joys we are privileged to experience in this life! I remember cradling a newborn baby in my arms, being amazed at the intricate detail of God's beautiful creation. I remember smiles and pictures on the first day of school. I remember cheering on the sidelines and celebrating winning teams. I remember walking down the aisle with my bride on the day of our wedding, and I remember walking down the aisle with my daughter on the day of hers. I remember the sunrise the other morning when the sky was painted with glorious colors and I recall sunsets when I watched the sun sink like a ball of fire into the ocean. We know what it's like to take in the grandeur of the mountains or to be in awe as we contemplate the depth of a canyon. Across huge swaths of this nation the autumn colors just peaked a couple weeks ago, and the landscape was blanketed in red and yellow and orange and rusk. Such beauty! Such splendor! Such wonderful things the Lord gives us to enjoy! Life is good! We have so much to celebrate! And as we get closer to Thanksgiving at the end of this month, we'll join to give thanks to the God of all grace, who gives it all.

Yet at the same time, we enjoy these blessings in a world that is dead and decaying. We love this world because this is what we know. But we know that along with all the joys life also brings sorrows. Sometimes the pain is acute and short-lived, and sometimes the pain never goes away. We know what it's like to stand by a casket and gaze at the lifeless body of someone we love. They're gone, and the hole in our hearts and the space in our lives seems like it will never be filled. I remember the time when another pastor and I met a young lady at the airport to tell her that while she was flying home across the country her parents and her brother whom she had just visited in Wisconsin were killed in a car accident. I remember the "pop" that sounded when I separated my wrist, and I remember waking up from the surgery that repaired it. I remember Pastor Pautz's good advice when I went through months of physical therapy. He said, "Don't try to help them. Don't try to hinder them. Just let them hurt you!" We know what it's like to suffer through Covid, to be wracked with fever and to lose all physical strength. We know what it's like to lose people who are close to us to Covid. We see the violence of crime at home and war abroad, and even if we haven't experienced the senseless death and destruction, our heart aches for those who do. We know what it's like to wage war within ourselves, to wrestle with the devil, to battle temptation, to fight to keep our thoughts pure and our words and actions pleasing to God. We know what it's like to lose the battle and fall into sin and kick ourselves for being so weak and foolish. We know that everything we have: every possession, every relationship, will finally slip from our grasp at the moment of our death, and we will leave this world just as we entered it—with nothing.

This is the reality of our existence in this sin-stained, fallen, broken, dead and decaying world. We celebrate the joy and beauty, pleasure and gladness, punctuated by disappointment, loss, suffering, pain, death and mourning. This is what we know. This is what we experience. But this is the old way, and the old way will soon be finished, and the old way will soon be replaced by something new.

The end of the first century was a difficult time for Christians. Hostility to Christians was on the rise, persecution was rampant, many believers in Jesus had already spilled their blood and given their lives because of their faith in their living Savior. Of Jesus' original twelve disciples, John may have been the only one left. All the others had been martyred or soon would be, and John himself, now an old man, had been sent into exile on a little island in the Aegean Sea called Patmos because of his preaching about Jesus. During this very dark time, while John was there on Patmos, the Lord Jesus gave him a glorious revelation of what was going to happen. The message of Revelation is simple: things look hopeless, but in the end God wins. And God's people win with him.

We know how messed up this world is. It boggles the mind to think that to rescue us from this cesspool we've created for ourselves God himself was willing to take on flesh and enter our world. The Son of God, Jesus Christ, endured poverty, malice, ridicule, torture, and death. Not only did he endure the physical pain of this life, he carried the weight of the world's sin and endured the anguish of the hell that our sin has deserved. "By his

wounds we are healed,” forgiveness was won by our substitute on the cross. Death was swallowed up in death when Jesus left the grave on Easter.

In Revelation Jesus shows John glimpse after glimpse into just what Jesus’ victory means for God and his saints. The heavens are opened, John sees the throne room of God, and he sees the Church, the saints triumphant, celebrating and praising God for his glory and his victory. And then we get to chapter 21, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. John heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes.” What is going to be like? I don’t know! The new creation that God is preparing for his people is so far outside the realm of our experience that I can’t even begin to fathom what it’s going to be like. Jesus says he’s going to prepare a place for us, so that he can come back and take us to the place where he is. St. Paul the Apostle says, “No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him” (1 Corinthians 2:9).

To live with God, to see Jesus face to face! I can’t imagine what that will be like. In a few minutes I’ll read the names of our Christian brothers and sisters who departed this life in the past year. They fought the good fight, they ran the race, they kept the faith, and now they’ve received the prize. They rest from their labors, and their souls are with Jesus, which is better by far. Think of a loved one you bade farewell. They departed this life in weakness, and you cried tears of sorrow, and rightly so, but they received the welcome from their Savior in heaven, “Well done, good and faithful servant! Enter into your Master’s happiness!” And even now they are experiencing things that you and I can only dream of. But along with them we’re still waiting for even more. It’s not just our souls that will live forever; we believe in the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. Jesus rose from the dead physically; so will we at the resurrection of all flesh. Let’s not think of heaven as just the place for disembodied spirits floating around forever. No, when the resurrection and final judgment comes, we will be raised to life, our bodies and souls will be made complete, and we will really live in the presence of God. We will have all our senses, we will see him with our own eyes, we will praise him with our own lips, we will serve him with our own hands. As we find ourselves aging, as our senses fail, as our bodies fail us in this life, just remember, as I’ve reminded faithful Christians: “We get a new body in the resurrection!” Every Christian I’ve shared that reminder with has said, “I’m so looking forward to that!” We will live in paradise restored in a perfect world unmarred by sin, untouched by grief or death. God will live with us, and he will be our God and we, his people. We will have all the joys of this feeble life—and more! —without any of the sorrows.

So here’s the challenge for us down here who are still waiting for glory to be revealed: Cherish the blessings that God gives you in this life, but don’t let this life distract you from the better life to come. Fool’s gold sparkles and glitters, but it is almost worthless because it isn’t the real thing. Cut glass and cubic zirconia sparkle and glitter, but they have little value because they’re not real diamonds. This world sparkles and glitters, it lures and entices, it invites us to grab onto it and take everything it offers—riches, power, pleasure, everything that gleams and gratifies. They can capture your heart. They can take your eyes off Jesus, and then you’ll lose the prize. These things are a cheap imitation of the life that is really life. Keep your eyes fixed on Jesus! Turn away from everything that hinders and the sins that can so easily entangle us, and keep trusting Jesus for the forgiveness of sins. Walk with him! Trust in him! Hold onto him! In him your sins are forgiven. In him you have the promise of life. In his body, the Church, there is life and salvation; outside the Church there is death and damnation. It is worth the struggles, the battles against temptation, saying “No” to worldly distractions, fleeing from sin. Don’t let anything rob you of the life to which Jesus has called you!

The time will come when we will look back on this life and say, “That was the old way.” Do you remember when we held the hand of a loved one as they slipped into eternity, and death stole them away from us? In heaven we’ll say, “That was the old way,” because there will be no more death; it won’t exist. That last enemy will be destroyed. Do you remember the pain of injuries, the sorrow of loss? In heaven we’ll say, “That was the old way,” because there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain; they won’t exist. Everything will be made new, just as it was back when God first created the universe.

One final thought: If you go shopping for something, you can expect to get what you pay for. Common items bring a common price: A 12-pack of soda, a clump of grapes at Safeway, a loaf of bread. But when you shop for something special you can expect to pay more. If it is something extremely beautiful or extremely rare or extremely old or extremely special, you can expect to pay a whole lot more. The price for you and your loved ones to spend eternity in the company of God is nothing less than the blood of Jesus Christ, God’s Son. The price Jesus paid when he yielded his life for the world on the cross is a price of infinite worth. If that is what God paid, so that you could experience heaven, it goes without saying that what the infinitely precious blood of Jesus purchased is so incredibly beyond our comprehension that we cannot even begin to fathom the ecstasy of heaven. This is what faithful Christians who have gone before us experience even now. This is what’s waiting for you. Amen.