

## 11-5-17 “All Witness’ Day” – Revelation 7:9-17

It has been a week full of holidays. On Tuesday, if you’re anything like me, you celebrated Halloween by eating more chocolate in one day than any human should really consume in a week. Thursday was *Día de los Muertos*, and in between, on Wednesday, we marked a holiday not quite as exciting as the other two, but important nonetheless. A holiday called All Saints Day.

Some people, perhaps you’re among them, are surprised when they hear that Presbyterians celebrate a day that has to do with saints. And it’s true that in our Protestant theology we don’t have a separate a category of people who are “saints” and somehow different from the rest of us. Rather, in the Reformed tradition we believe that we are *all*, at the same time, both saints and sinners. All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God – that’s our human condition in a fallen world. And yet at the same time, we are always being saved, sanctified, and renewed by the persistent grace of Jesus Christ. Which means when we say ‘all saints,’ we’re talking about you, and me, and every single person whose life is shaped and molded by God’s grace.

But on All Saints’ Day, we especially remember those people in our lives and in our faith community who have died, and left this world behind for a place where sin and pain and tears are no more.

In our reading from Revelation this morning, we get a vision of the saints who have died in the early church. They are standing around the throne of God, wearing white robes, waving palm branches, and singing praises. They live in the shelter of God’s love; no longer do they hunger or thirst or faint from the heat because the Lord is their Shepherd, and God himself will wipe away every tear from their eyes.

It’s a beautiful, comforting vision, and it’s interrupted halfway through by a question. One of the elders who is looking on pulls aside John, our narrator, and says, “Wait a minute...who are these people and where did they come from?”

Now, I have no exegetical evidence whatsoever to support this, but I have a sneaking suspicion that this elder might be a Presbyterian. His confusion just sounds so much like our typical response to the Book of Revelation. We are known as a denomination for our desire to keep things “decent and in order,” and this book is anything *but* that. It is apocalyptic, symbolic, whimsical. There are beasts and dragons and angels and plagues. Revelation is written in the language of visions and poetry, and some might say it sounds more like a game of Dungeons and Dragons or the plot of a Harry Potter novel than the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Perhaps *because* it is so strange, when I read Revelation, I always enlist the help of my friend and seminary president Brian Blount, who may be the only Presbyterian who has written multiple books about Revelation. If our elder were to ask Brian, “Who are these people and where did they come from?” Brian would answer, “Well, you might not recognize them, but we met them in chapter six. When we meet them there, they are a group of martyrs, those who have been ‘slaughtered for the word of God and for the testimony they have given.’ In that chapter, we hear them crying out to God, ‘How long, O Lord, until you come and save the earth, and vindicate our suffering?’ And God hands them each the white robe of a saint and says, ‘Just a little longer...the kingdom is almost at hand.’”

Brian might also tell our confused elder, “Don’t worry, you’ll see them again in chapter 12. In fact, alongside God, they are the heroes of this story. They are the ones, the text tells us,

who have conquered the Evil One ‘by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony.’”

The ones who were killed because of the testimony they had given. The ones who conquered the evil one by the word of their testimony. If you ask Brian Blount what it is that defines this group of people, that makes them saints, he will tell you it is this: Their unfailing witness to their conviction that Jesus is Lord. Even when they knew that their witness could have very negative consequences for them, could lead to their death.

Who are the saints we remember today? The saints are the ones who bear witness, through their words and their actions, to the fact that Jesus, and Jesus alone, is Lord.

That may not sound to *us* like a particularly earth-shattering confession, but for the early church, it was subversive and even dangerous. John wrote Revelation during a time when all Roman citizens were required to swear allegiance to the Roman empire, to proclaim that Caesar was Lord. The word “lord,” after all, is not just a religious word, it’s a but a political one. Caesar, the empire proclaimed, was lord and master. Caesar had ushered in the *Pax Romana*. Caesar had made Rome *great*.

And therefore, anyone who would not swear allegiance to the empire, who would not bow down and say that Caesar is Lord, was persecuted, tortured, even killed. “Caesar is Lord,” the Romans proclaimed, “Citizens, follow the man who is your leader!” But to this, the Christian witness said, “No. We have only one Lord,” they said, “one leader. And that Lord is Jesus Christ.”

*This* is the context in which John writes the book of Revelation. When we hear him rail against the Empire of Babylon, we can see the Empire of Rome – not-so-thinly-veiled – in the background. At the end of the vision, when the Lamb who was slain defeats the dragon, the Devil, and all the evils of the empire, the message of John’s once-cryptic vision becomes...pretty clear: “Jesus is Lord, and therefore Caesar is not. Jesus is Lord, and therefore Evil is not. Jesus is Lord, and therefore any other power that claims to be Lord will fall. Jesus is Lord, and therefore, God’s Love wins.

What is it they say? The more things change, the more they stay the same.

We live in a very different world from the first-century Christians. And yet we, too, can look around and see people, powers, and principalities calling for our ultimate allegiance. We too hear the cry of our modern day ‘Caesars’ who profess to be Lord. We, too, are called to witness.

To witness today is to proclaim that Jesus is Lord, and therefore you are not, and I am not, thanks be to God. Jesus is Lord and therefore the Church is not, nor is any other human institution. To witness today is to proclaim that Jesus is Lord, and therefore the President is not – nor is any politician or party, any soundbite, slogan, or ideology. Jesus is Lord, and therefore all forms of prejudice, discrimination, and supremacy are not. For there is only *One* who is supreme, and that One is God, who has called us *all* children: brothers, sisters, and siblings to one another.

To witness to Jesus as Lord is to follow the way of Christ when it is unpopular or even dangerous. A witness proclaims, “Jesus is my Lord, and therefore any time I have to choose between following Jesus and following Caesar, I will choose Jesus. Caesar may say, ‘Send the foreigners away,’ but Jesus says to welcome the stranger, and Jesus is Lord. Caesar may shout, ‘Revenge!’, but Jesus says turn the other cheek and pray for those who persecute you, and Jesus is Lord. Caesar may say, ‘I am the greatest – follow me!’ But Jesus says, ‘The one who wants to be great among you should humble themselves, should be last and servant of all.’ And Jesus, who humbled himself even to death on a cross, is Lord.”

Friends, being a witness is not an easy task. Which is why God doesn't ask us to do it alone. It's why God gives us the gift of the Church.

I think that might be one more thing the vision in this morning's text is reminding us. In the middle of a book of action and battles, of symbols and apocalyptic fervor, we get this different kind of vision. A vision of people from all nations and races and walks of life, gathered together...to worship God. Sound familiar?

This is, more or less, the experience of those first Christians. They expected the Second Coming of Christ. Instead, God sent the Holy Spirit to create the Church. They looked for Jesus to come from the sky, and instead, they met Jesus Christ in one another.

Friends, we are *still* called to be that Church today. United in our faith with all the saints who have gone before us, and all who will come after. United with one another through the bonds of love and our living witness to the fact that Jesus alone is Lord.

And therefore, friends, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. The one who alone is Lord, who alone deserves our utmost obedience and allegiance. Let us hold on to God and to one another so that we may not grow weary in bearing witness to God's grace.

Jesus is Lord. Caesar is not. Thanks be to the living God.