All Saints A 2026 Revelation 7:9-17 & Matthew 5:1-12

I recently read half-joking speculation that Christians get more of our ideas about the afterlife, heaven, and for that matter, hell, from Far Side cartoons than from scripture. As a life-long Far Side fan, I resemble that remark. St. Peter with his list at a podium in front of the pearly gates; a white-haired, bearded God looking at a computer screen with a "bless" button and a "smite" button in front of him; middle-aged angels—recognizable by their halos, wings, and harps, standing in clouds, discussing something mundane as if it were Monday morning at the office water cooler; and then of course horned devils with pitchforks, punching a time clock beside an assembly line of average looking sinners. The afterlife: more or less a longer version of this life with different scenery. Gary Larson is not alone in imagining and fictionalizing the hereafter: Dante and Milton come to mind. And it's no wonder that we form some of our assumptions from their work or the occasional movie or TV show, because scripture itself really doesn't give us many details about what awaits us beyond death. As focused as Christians can sometimes be on heaven—what it's like, who will be there, how we get in—and especially on hell—what it's like, who will be there, how we stay out—scripture tells us very little. Even when Jesus refers to the kingdom of "heaven" which is Matthew's more pious wording to avoid calling it the kingdom of "God" he is mostly speaking about the reign of God in *this* life, how to live in subject to God's will and rule in the midst of competing world views. It's 8 years today since I started my call here at St. Matthew; if you've been listening to me for that long, you're probably tired of me saying that Jesus' talk of kingdom living is almost always about *this life* as opposed to describing a vision of heaven that competes with Gary Larson (or Dante). But on All Saints Day, we do turn our attention and imagination beyond the church on earth, toward the church in heaven, and those who have gone before us into the life that awaits God's saints.

Of the limited information that scripture does tell us about our eternal future, much of it is found in the book of Revelation. That's problematic, because Revelation is not meant to be read literally; it's full of symbolism, fantasy, and cryptic language. It belongs to the apocalyptic genre of literature, which does not mean it's about the end of the world but that it reveals something that is hidden. John uses allegorical language to protect himself as he criticizes the abuses of the empire and encourages the fledgling church that was being persecuted by it. It is not a a warning about the future; it's not a code which, if properly deciphered, provides a road map to navigate the end times; it is a promise to the disciples who are striving to live by Jesus' values that even though the world is beating up on them, evil will not have the final say. Jesus claimed that the poor, the mourners, the meek, the merciful, the hungry and thirsty, and the persecuted were blessed…but in the first generations following his life, death, resurrection, and ascension, when the church expected his imminent return and he didn't come back, it certainly

did not seem like the poor, meek, and persecuted were blessed: they were just poor, meek, and persecuted. In the midst of their trials, Revelation is a word of hope: the struggle of discipleship, living as Jesus lived, has not totally transformed the world *yet*, but God isn't finished, so don't give up.

The snippet of Revelation that we read today gives us a glimpse of the final redemption that God has promised. Heaven is home to a multitude so great that no one can count it, people from every nation, tribe, and language, worshipping God day and night. The next time you feel like our service is running a little long, just consider it practice for eternal life where worship goes on forever. The crowd in Revelation had suffered but in the end are sheltered and shepherded, safe from the elements, no longer hungry or thirsty, guided to life-giving springs. And God wipes away every tear from their eyes. I've never seen a Far Side cartoon where God is wiping away the tears from the eyes of those who suffer and mourn.

On All Saints Day, or any day we think of the saints who have gone before us, when we envision the life they're living now, the details may be fuzzy, but one promise is certain: they are in the presence of God who provides for every need and erases every cause for sorrow. And that promise extends not just to the saints who have churches or holidays named after them or who help you find your lost keys but to all of us who are children of God. In baptism, God makes us saints, set apart for the purpose of holy living; but Luther reminds us that the way of Jesus requires daily renewal and recommitment, and that we continue all throughout this life as simultaneously saints *and* sinners. Sometimes we're meek and merciful, hungering for righteousness, and making peace; a lot of the time we're the ones causing the chaos. We may choose to recall only the best memories of those saints we name today, but God sees the whole of them and us and, mercifully, welcomes us all home anyway.

Some years we experience more loss or feel it more keenly. This afternoon we're hosting the synod's All Saints service, which is not something the synod usually does, but we've been mourning more than the typical number of deaths of clergy and lay leaders lately, and it has felt like a long season of grief. Even with all of Revelation's promises of life everlasting, when we are mourning, it doesn't *feel* like we are blessed. We can give thanks for the saints who have gone before us, we can be grateful for their witness and example, we can rejoice that they have come into the heavenly light of the Lord…and yet our hearts can still break that they are no longer walking this journey with us. Jesus calls us to love, and when we love deeply, we can expect to suffer profound grief. But Jesus also promises us that we who mourn *will be comforted.* There may not be a day that goes by when we forget the sting of the death of the saints in our lives; but there will be a day when God wipes every tear from our eyes. And so we hope in the Lord who keeps all promises in this life and beyond.