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Lutheran Church of the Epiphany~ Iglesia Luterana de la Epifanía, Hempstead, New York
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All Saints Day – November 1, 2020

Revelation 7:9-17, Psalm 34:1-10, 22, 1 John 3:1-3, Matthew 5:1-12

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. C: AMEN

Our hearts may be especially heavy this All Saints Day, my sisters and brothers in Christ. We have borne so very much this year: the difficulty of the new measures required of us to live safely under the threat of the COVID virus; the loss of so many people, to us individually as our loved ones may have perished without even a final visit after entering the hospital; or we may just feel the pain of bearing the weight of the death of 234,000 of our fellow inhabitants of the United States, or – incredibly – the end of 1,195,000 lives globally, taken by this virus.

We have borne the news, again and again of the killing of unarmed Black men by police. And with the wonders of modern technology, now we often have seen videos of the horrifying, violent travesties.

We have borne the heaviness of growing racial hatred and word of white supremacists arming themselves for – who knows what?

We have borne the battering of the political campaigns of this year, with what sometimes seems like unending noise and anger and lies.

We have borne the worry of increasing climate change, with ever more destructive storms and catastrophic wildfires, with our national government seemingly doing nothing to stem the tide, or even moving backward to take less conservative measures than we had taken in the past.

We have borne the inhumanity of our country's official policy toward refugees and asylum seekers so that they are not being granted their rights under international law to enter our country to seek safety and peace. Instead, they are left to live on the streets in Mexico. And we've just learned that the government cannot find the parents of over 500 children who were separated by the government from their parents upon entry into the United States a year ago. They were deported to their countries of origin by our government, without knowing anything about their children.

This is an awful lot for us to carry with us, day after day. “How long?” we may ask God. When will this end? When will you set things right again, Lord? When will you notice our sacrifices? When will there be an end to our suffering and tears? We stand in good company in asking this question. Moses asked it of God. So did the psalmists, as did Isaiah, Jeremiah, Hosea, Habakkuk and Zechariah. And do you know what? God asked the same question of humanity, as well. How long, my beloved children, will you not keep our covenant?

Today we look to our forebears in faith to see if they have an answer to our question. They were saints, having been baptized into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And they were sinners, too, having had their own trials and tribulations in their days. But we know that, since they were Christians, their sins were forgiven.

We can also look to John the Revelator for an answer to the question of how we can withstand the challenges of our day. For, just before the portion of the text that is our first reading today, he reports that “the kings of the earth and the magnates and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave and free, hid in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains...” and called out, “who is able to stand?” (Rev. 6:15-17.)

And the answer is that, in Christ, with God’s help, no matter what, we can stand. And when we do, those who come behind us will have found us to have been faithful. We know that is the case because it is the faithfulness of our forebears that we celebrate today that teaches us how to survive what may, at first blush, seem to be insurmountable obstacles. But God is with us, as God has been with our ancestors for millennia, and God always has held out the promise of salvation to the remnant of people who have come through the tribulation.

This is also the promise that Jesus shares with the disciples, when he delivers the first portion of his teaching sermon on the mount, telling them about who will be *blessed*, or *happy*, or *fortunate*, or *satisfied*, or *sustained*, or *much to be emulated*. All of these terms have been offered as English translations of the Greek word, *makarioi*, or *beati*, in Latin (from which we derive “*beatitudes*,” the term we use to refer to this collection of promises).

And why will these people be blessed? Because they are children of God This is what happens to people when they are baptized and have become believers, Christians.

“But wait,” you might say. I’ve been baptized for years – maybe almost all your life – “and I’m not feeling blessed. I’m not comforted, my hunger for righteousness hasn’t been filled, I don’t experience mercy in this life of travail.”

Yes, because the beatitudes, these promises Jesus makes for the reversal of the nature of existence for people who are overborne in the world, are about their (our) existence in the kingdom – the realm – of heaven. That might mean that we’ll live into the promises after our earthly deaths. Or it might mean that we’ll know them to be at work in our lives when God’s kingdom comes to earth as it is in heaven. These are pure promises, but they are future promises. We just will have to slog through our troubles on earth for a while longer.

But we know that while we do that, we have the faith of our foremothers and forefathers to look to as examples of Christian faithfulness. They have been Christ to us and in this way, Jesus’ ministry has continued in the lives of generations of his disciples. And John reminds us that they are “a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands.” (Rev. 7:9.) The branches suggest the Old Testament Feast of Tabernacles, which preceded the Exodus to freedom from Egypt. In Revelation, the call was to Christians to join a new exodus, out of the Roman Empire, led by the Shepherd-Lamb, by Jesus. And the invitation remains to us to come out of the influence of the imperfect world to live in the community of Christ. Our ancestors in faith have come out of the great tribulation, so they know what we are facing. Their example is available to us to hold on to Jesus as long as is necessary.

And we also know that God walks with us every step of our lives – making a way where it seems no way through the trouble we face exists. God’s Holy Spirit is our constant companion, leading and guiding us, ordering our steps, and showing us how to live in love, acceptance and joy, always being encouraged and sustained.

Let’s pray: For all the saints, who from their labors rest, all who by faith before the world confessed your name, O Jesus, be forever blest. Alleluia! Alleluia! Oh, blest communion, fellowship divine, we feebly struggle, they in glory shine; yet all are one within your great design. Alleluia! Alleluia! But then there breaks a yet more glorious day: the saints triumphant rise in bright array; the King of glory passes on his way. Alleluia! Alleluia! “For All the Saints,” No. 174, vv. 1,4,7. In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. **C: Amen.**