

As I worked on today's worship, tears came to my eyes, remembering all the departed saints I miss so much. Still, while they are tears of sadness, they are also tears of joy for what the people meant to me, and they are tears of solemn joy and hope that, as Harry Chapin sang in All My Life is a Circle, "But I have this funny feeling; That we'll all be together again."

Revelation 7:9-17

⁹After this, I looked, and there was 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. ¹⁰They cried out in a loud voice, saying, "Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!" ¹¹And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, ¹²singing, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen."

¹³Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?" ¹⁴I said to him, "Sir, you are the one that knows." Then he said to me, "These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. ¹⁵For this reason, they are before the throne of God and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them. ¹⁶They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; ¹⁷for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

In today's All Saints scripture, there is a tribute to those beloved, remembered saints who have gone before us and who loved us, mentored us, and taught us about life. We remember those who were vital to our lives. We lit candles for them and gave thanks to God for them. But also, All Saints Sunday reminds us that we, too, are saints who love and serve those who come after us who are also saints.

The Book of Revelation all too often seems like some mysterious science fiction or fantasy book. But, when read with a discerning eye, Revelation is a beautiful vision of hope. I know many folks don't see it that way; for them, it is either avoided or viewed as a roadmap to doomsday.

As someone said to me the other day, most mainline pastors tend to avoid it and leave it as a playground for the more fundamentalist pastors. But we, the mainline or oldline churches

like us, must discover that Revelation has messages for the faithful as well, not just the fanatical. To do this requires careful and close reading.

Essentially, the book is a letter of encouragement to Christians and Churches undergoing sporadic persecution. Some scholars think it was systematic oppression, but I think it was more often social, political, and economic ostracism, causing people to weaken in their faith or leave it altogether.

Of course, the early faithful were outcasts. While they might pray for the emperor, they did not worship him as a deity, nor did they worship the Roman gods either, and thus, they were suspect and viewed as unpatriotic. Revelation serves to remind us that salvation doesn't come from Rome, emperors, politicians, or partisan political parties. Salvation comes from God and Jesus, the lamb of God.

The letter encourages them to remain faithful and to trust God is with them in all they encounter.

The letter is full of symbolism; because of this, it must be taken seriously, but not literally. Such things as numbers are often used as symbols or codes, the most famous being 666, the number of the beast.

Every age has usually identified the beast as standing for someone from their own age as the prophesied beast, proving we are in the last times. However, the name of the beast is most likely a code solved by substituting letters in Greek for numbers in Hebrew. The code reveals the beast as Nero, an infamous and often cruel emperor.

John also uses numeric symbolism to reassure folks that their faith is not in vain. Come what may, they have a home with God in this life and the next. It speaks of the 144,000 who are "saved." This is a huge number 144,000 is a symbolic number, which means too many to count. Its symbolic meaning is rich. Twelve tribes of Israel times the 12 apostles 144 multiplied by the number 1000, which is more than can be counted. 144,000 is not a literal number, but it is a worldwide picture of salvation.

This view is repeated in our passage when John the Seer views a great crowd in heaven that cannot be counted, from every tribe, nation, language, and people. Heaven is jam-packed with folks. Many have suffered in many ways, but that is now over.

The angel tells John it is people who have come through great hardship and now are home with God.

While we don't suffer ostracism and persecution for our faith in any way comparable to the first Christians, we all have suffered. Some people we remember have been persecuted because of aspects of their faith.

I was thinking of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. crossing the Edmund Pettis Bridge with civil rights marchers who suffered violence and persecution for their faith. This is true for them and many saints who have given their lives and safety for their faith. In an article by Louis Brogdon Jr., an African American pastor, he called today "Martyrs Sunday", which celebrates how meaning has been carved out of experiences that were meant to destroy our people.

We all have suffered loss, maybe not this way, but in many others. We have lost a loved one, our youthful abilities, a job, a relationship, have a loved one with dementia, dreams that didn't materialize, we have suffered financial ills, as well as physical ills, been troubled by wars around the world, and gun violence, hunger, and racism at home.

For all who have suffered, and that is all of us, God is with us as we go through our trials and will see us safely home to be with all the Saints who, from their labors, rest. God doesn't cause these things to happen but doesn't waste them either. God works through the evil and pain that we suffer from. God is with us in these difficult times and most trying times.

For Saints past and present, God offers a tender word of presence and comfort and a vision of future hope. The image of drying our tears is used to express the tenderness and comfort God brings to us. David Lose reminds us that God sees us and knows of the grief that weighs down our hearts, the depression and addictions that oppress us, and the challenges and uphill struggles we face and contemplate. In everything, God is with us.

For those who face death, this passage speaks the word of comfort that God is going to be with us in this journey to new life.

Every Sunday, I greet you with Good Morning Saints. Take this seriously: you are a saint, you matter, and make a difference to other people. And we, together as the body of Christ, are saints because, as a church, we too, matter to many people and groups in our community.

Jesus encourages us to hang in there when there is adversity, testing, or suffering. Stand firm in your faith. The world can't afford to do without your contributions.

But there is also a call to us to remember that when inevitably, we too, become saints from whom our labors rest, we have a home with God, and we will be united with those who have gone before us. For those who we had difficulties within this life-- in heaven with God, there

will be peace and reconciliation through God's gifts of perfect love, perfect understanding, and perfect forgiveness.

But we don't have to wait for heaven to use these tools. Jesus came to bring us these gifts now: **love, understanding, and forgiveness**. These are tools of the saints given to us by God.

Peter Mayer, former lead guitarist for Jimmy Buffett and Christian musician, does a yearly tour called Stars and Promises. Marlene and I have attended for about twenty years. This is an essential part of my holiday season. This year, we will go to Cleveland on December 5th for his concert. He has a song called Harmony, which describes a difficult relationship between a father and a son. The son has moved away and doesn't return home, and a wedge is driven between them. The father dies, and the son has been coming home to talk to him to wrestle out a thing or two he could never say. It reminds me of my father and foster father, and I know that I will see them again in a climate of perfect love, understanding, and forgiveness.

He also sings Sing Joy, which was sung at our daughter's funeral in Saint Louis, and I know I will see her again. I wear a blue wristband that says "SING JOY".

There will be a reunion of all the saints we have lost over the years. Thank you, God, for this.

I know many of my colleagues will not agree with it but will find it silly, but I trust that I will be reunited with our dear lost companion animals. I know this might be a stretch, but reading from Genesis 9: 8-17, after the flood:

⁸Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, ⁹“As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you ¹⁰**and with every living creature that is with you**, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark.^[a] ¹¹I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.” ¹²God said, “This is the sign of the covenant that I make **between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations**: ¹³I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. ¹⁴When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, ¹⁵I will remember my covenant that is between me and **you and every living creature of all flesh**, and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. ¹⁶When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and **every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth**.” ¹⁷God said to Noah, “**This**

is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.”

Five times, we hear it is more than just people but all creatures and creation that God covenanted with.

Mary Chapin Carpenter puts it this way in a song called My Heaven, “your childhood dog in dad's old chair.”

God's covenant with the world is more extensive than we imagine.

So, for all the saints we remember from the past, for all the saints now living, and for saints to come, thanks be to God. God Bless you, saints. God is with you now and forever.