**Your Reward is Great in Heaven**

Based on [Revelation 7:9-17](http://biblia.com/books/esv/Re7.9-17): and [Matthew 5:1-12](http://biblia.com/books/esv/Mt5.1-12)

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All Saints’ Day

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**“Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you”** (Matthew 5:11-12).

Beloved Saints of Immanuel Lutheran Church,

Our reading from Revelation, St. John tells us what heaven will look like in the end. It is a vision of all the saints, Holy people, who are gathered around the throne of the Lamb in white robes, waving palm branches and praising God for his Salvation. And it says, “**These [saints] are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the lamb**.”

This vision of heaven hasn’t happened yet. It is the end, the Last Day includes all saints of all nations and tribes, from every time and every place. St. John sees all of you in that vision, and you are described as “those who have come out of the great tribulation”…out of the great suffering, out of the great affliction. Today--"All Saints Day"--the church remembers two things: We remember those who have come out of the great tribulation. Those faithful departed who have won the race and kept the faith and now rest from their labours. And, we remember those who will come out of the great tribulation, but as yet still remain in it. That is all of you. The church in heaven has come out of the great tribulation; the church on earth still remains in it.

As for now, we are called to suffer and so when we face persecutions and evil, we shouldn't be surprised. But we should be dour either, because God promises this suffering will end. This present evil age, it is something we are passing through. Jesus says in John 16:21, “**When a woman is giving birth, she has sorrow because her hour has come, but when she has delivered the baby, she no longer remembers the anguish, for the joy that a child is born into the world.”** And St. Paul in Romans 8:18, **“the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.”** Two promises from the word of God, (1) that there is an eternal weight of glory to come for all saints; and (2) that this present time there will be suffering.

And does not our Lord, Jesus Christ, promise as much? He says in our Gospel lesson, “**Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, *for your reward is great in heaven***” (Matthew 5:11-12). Saints will suffer precisely because of their holiness, because they have been given the Holy Spirit. Disciples will be persecuted precisely because they are disciples, ones who carry in their heart and on their lips the word of God. Christians will be mocked, scorned, shamed, and delivered up because that is what happened to Christ, and Christians have Christ by faith.

It has happened to me a handful of times in my life--I’m sure it has to some of you as well--that someone will tell you about the moment they “chose” to follow Jesus. I used to feel the profound need to correct them on the spot. I still do, but I used to so by quoting the bible...like Jesus’ words “You did not choose me, but I chose you” (John 15.16). Or St. Paul’s words, “Faith is a gift” (Ephesians 2:8), meaning it’s not a choice made by the sinner’s sovereign will. **Or maybe I’d illustrate how Jesus’ words are, in themselves, powerful and effective…how, for instance, even the wind and the waves heard Jesus’ rebuke and obeyed. And there’s no evidence that Nature had yet reached the age of accountability.** // In the hope that rhetorical questions can be more innocuous than assertions, now I just say, “**You chose to follow Jesus? Why would you choose to suffer?**”

When you were baptized, you became a saint. *At that moment* you were washed in the blood of the Lamb, you were garmented with the righteousness of Christ. *At that moment* God made you a saint--a *Holy Person*--because he gave you His Holy Spirit. And a**t that moment you were elected, chosen to share in his sufferings by living a cross-shaped life.** And while you have every reason to rejoice in your heavenly birthright, the Devil and the World see your new birth as a big fat bull’s-eye for their flaming arrows. Bummer of a birthmark, Hal!

Why would you choose to be baptized? Why would anyone? Why would you choose a birthmark that reveals to the world that you are an illegal immigrant here and should be treated as such? **Why would you choose to mark yourself with Christ and give Satan a new target, and a new conquest?**

Why would you choose to suffer? You wouldn’t. Paul didn’t. In Philippians 3, He recounts how in his former life without Christ, he **was holding on to his “victorious living” through a “righteousness that comes through the law.” And it was in the midst of that idolatry when Christ called *him*** and chose *him* to suffer by bearing his Name in a world opposed to it. And when he received it, he regarded aught else as rubbish, Paul says everything he had apart from Christ is literally “a dung pile” compared to the riches of knowing Christ.

I think it’s telling, in the gospel, that when a man comes to Jesus starry- eyed and saying: “I will follow you wherever you go”—that Jesus shoots him down. **He shoots him down. “Foxes have holes, birds have nests, but I’ve got nothing here, in and of this world, to cling to.”** The man “chooses” to follow, Jesus says, “no you don’t, you don't know what you're asking.” That’s not very outreach oriented of Jesus is it?

**I mean, somebody comes to the church and so much as hints that they’re interested in membership, you start drooling like a starving man at a steak dinner, and you give them visitors packages, welcome guest trinkets, and become desperate as an ugly girl at a dance; checking the tone of your voice, softening your words *and God’s Word* because you don’t want to turn them off and lose your chance!** Good grief ladies and gentlemen, you’d think *THEY* were offering *YOU* the words of eternal life, not the other way around.

You’d think you were the dog seeking the scraps from *their* table, but you need to hold perspective or else you will despair in your suffering. *Fellow Saints*!...the church has been given the keys to the kingdom of heaven,…for you are Peter, making the Good confession of the Gospel. **That Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, and there is salvation in no one else and that’s just fine because he’s yours by baptism through faith.** And upon this rock is built the church, the *only* fortress that stands against Hades and the judgment of fire to come. When you have the gospel, y**ou have the keys to the kingdom; all *they* have is the *power to reject you.*** The only power they have is to say “no” and to shame you for forcing your religion upon them. And all too often you bow down to that power of theirs and you sacrifice to *it* like it’s the very power and presence of God himself. Repent.

Saints in Christ, I say all these things to remind you and give encouragement that **you don’t have to wonder whether your inadequacies or uncomely appearance your meekness or poverty of spirit will wrest the elect from the Father’s hand.** If so, then no one would be saved. But you are the church, believers in Jesus Christ *who gather together to hear God’s word and receive his gifts* because it is He who gives them. And when sound doctrine is preached in the church and people actually believe it, there is no greater power on earth. Then visitors to your church don’t give hoot about how much you appreciate them, or welcome them, or whether there is a family-friendly facility, or “real genuine community” in your coffee fellowship. Those things are earthly treasures that have their place, but they don’t offer Christ. But i**f they are told and know that in this place God himself is present in body and blood according to his promise, forgiving sins and giving new life…sheep who hear the shepherds voice are not going to let a personality clash with the pastor or any other conflict in the church get in the way of their edging through the crowd to touch the hem of Christ**, or keep them from climbing a sycamore tree to see him when he comes to town. They'll cross whoop up drive or even come to some small community hall to get what he's giving. And you’d have to pry the Sacrament from their cold dead hands because, like Paul, faith will count all things as dung, in order to gain Christ, and be found *in Him*.

Jesus knows that no one in their right mind would follow him in this life, had they not been given faith in the resurrection. **No one who isn’t wholly certifiable would ask Jesus to let her sons be seated next to him in his glory, one at his right hand, one at his left…crucified.** (Matthew 20:20). No one who actually counted the full cost discipleship would ever say, “**Yes Lord, I can drink the cup you drink, in fact make it a double.”** *Jesus* didn’t even say that! He prayed the cup be taken away, even as Paul prayed his thorn be taken away! No one seeks out suffering; no one. It is something that your thorn-filled vocation, in this thorn-filled creation gives you. And you bear with it rejoicing in the resurrection to come.

God calls us to follow his Word, live out your vocation and endure the suffering that he promises will come (Mark 10:30). These are the "good works" that he has prepared for his saints to do. You see though, in our pride, we want to cherry-pick and *choose* our good works. But it is God who prepares them in advance, and Jesus doesn’t let you choose them. He doesn’t give you the *option* of following him. Jesus never *asked* your hand in marriage; he just proposed. **Now gentlemen, I bet *you* “*asked”* your wife to marry you, which was your first sin against the headship you owe her.** You said, “**Will you marry me**?” giving her the option and surrendering your gospel to the power of her will. You should have said it to *her* like Christ said it to *you*: “**Marry me**.” Because Christ doesn’t “Ask your hand in discipleship”. He doesn’t say “**Will you follow Me?**”…He says, “**Follow Me**.” He doesn’t give you option to say yes or no, only the option to say “**No**,” to refuse, to reject, to remove your baptismal garment and hide it in the closet to fit into the world and dodge those good works *Christ* prepared *for you*--to tempt you to do the self-indulgent worldly-motivated charity work of your own choosing.

Brothers and sisters, Satan wants to get you to sell your baptismal birthright for a pittance, that’s why he sends the flaming arrows. That’s why the world mocks you to “**Take off that ridiculous robe of righteousness, it doesn’t even suit you.**” You see, Satan, he can no longer persecute and kill Jesus. He already lost that battle 2000 years ago. S**o now--and the book of Revelation is very clear on this--now he persecutes Christ’s body, the church, instead…in the hopes that, when he takes aim and sends suffering your way, he can get you to take off your saintly white robe quickly to avoid what’s coming.**

But Christ is a master of jujitsu and uses the very power of that suffering sent by Satan *against him* in order to build his church. **The arrows provoke the saints to cry to the Lord day and night making the Good confession with their martyrs blood, which is precious in God’s sight (Psalm 116:15).** And God allows these arrows of suffering, because He promises that in baptism you were garmented with a full suit of armor to extinguish them. And the things they *can* kill are rubbish anyway, for they can’t kill Christ, or the life of souls in him. He promises, and God doesn’t lie.

You have the choice to sell your baptismal birthright, it's true, but contrary to Pop Christianity, you don’t have the choice to buy it. *You don’t got the scratch*. **But that’s why it has to be a gift; and it *is*!...and it’s *yours*.** For **the glory and comfort of this world is a pittance compared to the eternal glory of being washed in the blood of the lamb who was slain before the foundation of the world.**

This lamb of God is Jesus Christ, whose blood covers your nakedness, forgives your wretchedness, armors you against the devil, the world and the old Adam, and garments you for the wedding feast in his kingdom, which has no end…wherein lies your prize of the upward call in Christ Jesus…the resurrection call from the last seat of the table where He says to you, “**Friend, move up higher**"...for yours is the kingdom of heaven.

He said to me, “These are the people who have come safely through the terrible persecution. They have washed their robes and made them white with the blood of the Lamb. **15**That is why they stand before God's throne and serve him day and night in his temple. He who sits on the throne will protect them with his presence. **16**Never again will they hunger or thirst; neither sun nor any scorching heat will burn them, **17**because the Lamb, who is in the center of the throne, will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of life-giving water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”