

Grace, mercy and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen!

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

[The 144,000]

“Who are these, clothed in white robes and where have they come? ... These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation” (Revelation 7:13, 14b).

The year 2020 has been packed with tribulations:

- The COVID-19 Pandemic
- The governor limiting church services to 10 or fewer – *essentially closing the church for months*
- The governor’s mask mandate
- And an unending list of new and ever-changing rules to follow

It is certainly easy to become pessimistic through all of this. But should we – *as followers of Christ* – be pessimistic?

In a letter written A.D. 250 by Cyprian – the bishop of Carthage – to his friend Donatus, he describes Christians as joyous people. He describes Christians as optimistic people. He wrote:

“This is a cheerful world as I see it from my garden, under the shadow of my vines. But if I could ascend some high mountain and look very far, what would I see? A gang of robbers on the highways, pirates on the seas, armies fighting, cities burning, in the amphitheaters people murdered to please the applauding crowds, selfishness and cruelty, misery and despair under all roofs. It is a bad world, Donatus, an incredibly bad world. But I have discovered in the midst of it a quiet and holy people who have learned a great secret. They have found a joy that is a thousand times better than any of the pleasures of our sinful life. They are despised and persecuted, but they care not. They are masters of their souls. They have overcome the world. These people, Donatus, are the Christians – and I am one of them.”¹

¹ *Encyclopedia of Sermon Illustrations* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1988), 38.

Today on this All Saints Day, this is most certainly true. We, Christians, are different and we should remain different from the sinful world around us. We live *in* the world, but we are not *of* the world. We are different since we are saints of God. By grace, we are no longer dead in our trespasses and sins, since by faith in Christ we are changed. We hear this in today's epistle: ***"See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him"*** (1 John 3:1). You see, the world does not know the love of Christ as we know it.

Although the world around us is full of suffering and disease, we know that this is only temporary. As children of God, we remain optimistic! We remain joyous!

As small "o" orthodox Christians in 2020, we expect to be despised by the sinful world, since we follow Christ as our Anchor and our Rock, and not the shifty sands of public opinion. We do this, since through Jesus Christ, we have overcome the world, so that whatever the sinful world throws at us, we just march on toward the goal that Jesus alone has won for us: eternal life, forgiveness of sins and salvation!

On this All Saints Day, we remember the departed saints in heaven. But, for us, here, this morning, we look forward to that goal, that is, the kingdom of heaven. Today, God teaches us about the *now but the not yet* in a comforting vision of heaven from Revelation 7.

As Christians, this is where we live. We live in the *now but the not yet* on this side of heaven. You see, through our faith in Christ that began at our baptism through the work of the Holy Spirit, we are experiencing eternal life now – we are saints, but at the same time, we are sinners. As saints and sinners now, we still experience pain, suffering, heart ache, hunger, thirst, and plague. We are saved now, but we have not yet truly experienced what being saved looks like without sin in heaven.

So, on this side of heaven, we march forward toward the triumph that has been won for us through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is where our reading from Revelation 7 begins. John is inspired to tell us, ***"Then I saw another angel ascending from the rising of the sun, with the seal of the living God, and he called with a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to harm earth and sea, saying, 'Do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees, until we have sealed the servants of our God on their foreheads.' And I heard the number of the sealed, 144,000, sealed from every tribe of the sons of Israel"*** (Revelation 7:2-4).

From then on, we hear of the 12,000 from each of the 12 tribes.

Picture it this way, these 12 tribes of Israel are marching into battle on parade. They are in perfect formation, just like our U.S. military as they march in formation. As the 12 tribes march, they are prepared for battle as we remember Christ's comforting words: ***"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age"*** (Matthew 28:18-20). This battle is known as the Church Militant. In this battle, we proclaim Christ in our vocations – parent, child, boss, employee, and the list goes on. This is our life now.

These 144,000 represent God's people on earth, who are ready to carry out their mission and thus enter the valley of the shadow of death. Again, *this is us!* You see, no matter how much we suffer here on earth, these 144,000 fulfill the mission of their Lord as the Lord protects them in their faith.

The Church Militant – *you and me* – will suffer and die in the Lord's mission, but we will never lose faith, for the Lord will defend us in that faith. And in the end, the Church Militant will become the Church Triumphant – *the faithful in heaven*.

Now, should we be worried that we may not be a part of the 144,000? If we trust that we have been saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone, then no. You see, this number is a representation of total completeness. It gives a numerical picture of God's people on earth in perfect marching order, in perfect step. This is a perfect and complete army, fully equipped wearing the full Armor of God (Ephesians 6:10-18) and ready to do God's work. But how do we know this? Well, the Triune God tells us through John.

He says, ***"After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands..."*** (Revelation 7:9).

You see, according to the scene of the Church Triumphant – *the saints in heaven* – the number is so great that they could not be counted! So, who are these 144,000? They are the whole body of Christians who have lived from Christ's bodily ascension into heaven all the way to His Second Coming. You see, we – *by faith in Christ* – are among this 144,000.

[The Church Militant]

Today, we are living in the *now but not yet*. This is known as the Church Militant. Through Christ, we are saints, but we are also sinners. And as sinners, we experience suffering as we fight under the banner of Christ against our evil foes: Satan, the sinful world, and our sinful flesh.

Each All Saints Sunday, many of us look forward to singing “Behold a Host, Arrayed in White” and “For All the Saints.” These two hymns have catchy tunes, but what really makes them special are the lyrics. These two hymns portray the *now but not yet* perfectly as they contrast between life in the Church Militant and life in the Church Triumphant.

First, the Church Militant: In “Behold a Host, Arrayed in White,” the lyrics proclaim a “priestly band” consisting of martyrs, but martyrs here is used in a wide sense, meaning all believers who have suffered in this life because of, then die in, their Christian faith. This Church Militant “wept through bitter years” and the great afflictions of this life as they willingly toiled faithfully and sowed God’s Word on the “steep and narrow path” of this temporal world. This caused them much heartache, as they were despised and scorned by those who rejected Christ and His Church, but they endured to the end.

In “For All the Saints,” the military imagery of the Church Militant begins to fully come out in stanza two: “Thou, Lord, their captain in the well-fought fight.” In the Church Militant imagery of this hymn, God provides His saints with sufficient armor and weaponry to wage war against Satan and his spiritual forces of evil. Though at times the saints feebly struggle, and at other times their hearts are brave, they continue to rely on Christ’s strength as they are fully equipped with His Word. The Church, coming out of the Great Tribulation, is assured of victory.

[The Great Tribulation]

So, what is this Great Tribulation? Revelation pictures tribulation as the continuing reality for all Christians.

For John – *the writer of Revelation* – he surely experienced tribulation. Due to his witness to Christ, he was exiled to the island of Patmos. He also suffered as his brother James was martyred.

Indeed, Christ Himself acknowledged that His people on earth were and would continue to experience suffering and tribulation. Christ says, ***“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 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 5:10-12). And the Apostle Paul stated that ***“through many tribulations it is necessary for us to enter the kingdom of God”*** (Acts 14:22) and ***“all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted”*** (2 Timothy 3:12).

Even though we are persecuted, we pray for those who persecute us, so that they, too, would have the same joy we have in Jesus Christ, since He died for the forgiveness of all people, including them!

So, are the tribulations in our life, in fact, the Great Tribulation? For most, if not every Christian, we will experience a testing of our faith in Jesus at some point in our lives. The question for us is this: How will we – or did we – handle the testing? Will we be strengthened by the test, or will we be weakened by the test? Will we remain in the one, true Christian faith, or will we leave the faith?

For our many members who are in school, from elementary school to graduate school, they face this test daily. Is God real? Did Jesus really suffer and die for me? Did Jesus really rise from the dead on Easter? Did Jesus really forgive my sins? Did Jesus really bodily ascend into heaven? Is Jesus really going to return to judge the living and the dead? These are questions that our school-aged members have and likely others, possibly you, have. These are the same questions I had.

When I was going through Sunday school and catechism classes, I had a childlike faith. I believed that Jesus is my Savior and Lord. I believed that He was raised from the dead and that He will come again.

But then came my senior year of high school and my freshman year of college. I began to question everything as my pastor began teaching that the Bible was not completely true. How could something that I believed to be an absolute truth, become subjective, or a matter of opinion? This was my personal tribulation. I began to doubt everything. If the Bible wasn’t true, what could I trust? But through this personal tribulation, Christ led me to this synod. I passed through my personal tribulation to find a church body that continues to remain faithful and anchored to Jesus Christ and to His Law and Gospel.

Is this what John is referring to? We are getting closer. But the Great Tribulation is actually so horrible that even God's own elect would not be saved unless those horrific days were cut short for their sake (Matthew 24:22). So, the evil days immediately before Christ's second coming, together with their sufferings and persecutions, is called the "Great Tribulation."

The real "Great Tribulation" is what Christ will rescue His faithful from.

But we will all experience tribulations. Due to our faith in Christ, we will be hated and mocked. We are seeing this more and more these days as the sinful world has become more outspoken against Christ and His teachings. So, as we confess Jesus Christ as Lord in our vocations of our daily life, expect push back, but when that happens, reply in love. And if they don't listen, know that they don't actually hate you, but they actually hate Jesus Christ. So, we are always in good company. During His earthly ministry, Jesus was hated, but He also gave His life so that by believing in Him, they too, would be saved.

So, every Christian will experience some form of tribulation. Some tribulations and sufferings will be so piercing that the very faith and foundation of the believer's hope will be severely tried, almost to the point of despair and defeat. For that Christian, at that moment, his sufferings and trials are his great tribulation. But, by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, our life does not come to an end at our death. In fact, it continues in the Church Triumphant.

[The Church Triumphant]

Christ's Church will be "***the ones coming out of the great tribulation***" (Revelation 7:14a). Today, we refer to this as *the now but not yet*, but for those in heaven, this is their *now*. They are no longer sinners, like us. They are truly saints by God's grace and favor.

This, the Church Triumphant, is all the saints in heaven who have entered heavenly rest. They are relieved from the labor of fighting and of all dangers. They are experiencing the fulfillment of the promise that the Church Militant only receives a glimpse of in the Divine Service. As "Behold a Host, Arrayed in White" proclaims, these saints "enjoy the sabbath rest" as they gather around the heavenly altar as Christ's bride partaking of the heavenly wedding feast with Christ, the Bridegroom Himself.

Likewise, “For all the Saints” proclaims this *now but not yet* in seven words in stanza four: “We feebly struggle, they in glory shine.” We struggle today while the Church Triumphant is shining in the light of Christ in heaven.

This message of the Church Triumphant is a message of comfort for all Christians as they *“hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb in the midst of the throne [is] their shepherd, and he [is guiding] them to springs of living water, and God [wipes] away every tear from their eyes”* (Revelation 7:16-17).

Now – *do not be mistaken* – no one is sad in heaven. For these tears were wiped away as they entered the Church Triumphant. There is no more hunger, yet they eat. There is no more thirst, yet they drink. Everyone is completely satisfied as they are in the presence of their Lord. Everyone in the Church Triumphant sees their Lord as He is (1 John 3:2b). Everyone is at peace.

[The Church is Sealed]

Our reading in Revelation began speaking about the sealed 144,000 from every tribe of the sons of Israel. Remember, this is us in perfect marching order as the Church Militant as we advance into battle against our evil foes: sin, death and Satan.

But how does God seal His people? And do we actually have seals upon our foreheads? Well, not exactly. But we are sealed. We are indeed sealed through visible marks and in doing so, we are sealed as God’s people.

We are sealed ultimately at our Baptism, when God the Father adopted us as His own child through the water and the Word. At this sealing, the Holy Spirit gave us faith to believe in Jesus Christ as the sign of His cross was made over our foreheads and our hearts. Here, God the Father identifies the baptized as His child. At that moment, we received the robe of Christ’s righteousness that covers all our sins. This is the white robe that the Church Triumphant is wearing in heaven (Revelation 7:13-14). These robes were not earned but instead given to us only by God the Father’s grace. You see, we are sealed as children of the Heavenly Father at our Baptism.

But God the Father does not just stop there! Since our life is not easy as we face many tribulations in our life here on earth, He comes to us as He invites us to the marriage feast of His Son and His bride, the Church, in the Lord's Supper – the foretaste of the wedding feast to come!

He comes to strengthen our Baptismal seal as we partake of the Lord's Supper. You see, God seals us using visible elements: water in Baptism; bread and wine in the Lord's Supper. Through these marks – Baptism and the Lord's Supper – the Holy Spirit works according to those words and promises, thereby the Holy Spirit seals God's people and confirms that they are indeed His people. In doing so, we are strengthened knowing that God will protect us in every tribulation.

As I have said before, we each have free will. So, we can choose to take off our robe of righteousness and go about our lives alone, apart from God. In doing so, we ignore God's grace and instead inherit eternal damnation. But, when we repent of our sins against God our Father, we are forgiven, and instantly, He places back upon you and me the white robe of His Son that covers all our sins.

You see, it is all by God the Father's grace that we are saved through His only begotten Son Jesus Christ. He desires everyone to be saved through the merit and work of His Son's suffering, death and resurrection for you and me!

The Triune God – the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – continues to protect and identify us as His redeemed children in faith. This is why He continues to seal us with the assurance of His forgiving love in the Gospel promise. Since we are sealed in Baptism and strengthened in the Lord's Supper, we are guaranteed as inheritors of heaven, where the white-robed, palm-waving saints are singing!

Through the Baptismal font and the Lord's altar, we have been sealed in His grace. In this grace, we, even through tribulations in our life now are assured that we will be numbered with the saints in the Church Triumphant! Here on earth, we may be dirty and sinful, but in heaven we are pure as we wear Christ's robe of righteousness! We – *by grace through faith in Christ alone* – will pass through the Great Tribulation wearing the robes that have been given to us and made white through the blood of the Lamb to the comfort and joy of eternal life with the faithful in heaven! Amen.

The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

✠ SOLI DEO GLORIA ✠