

"The Great Ordeal"

Revelation 7:9-17 & 1 John 3:1-3

November 6, 2005

No matter what I ever tell you at other times, I have to say that the book of Revelation is my favorite book in the Bible. It is hard to figure out at points and I can understand why so many people avoid it. Still I think that is so unfortunate because it is so powerful and beautiful. Imagine the image that John sees and records in our first lesson today. A great multitude - more people that could be numbered, gathered around the throne of God - all dressed in pure white robes - all shouting or singing with great joy about the salvation they have received from God. Then an elder comes up behind John and poses a question: "Vel, then der, Jon - who are all these here folks?" {I'm pretty sure that the wise old elder was an old Norwegian}. John responded - 'I have no clue. You tell me.' So the Elder, 'Vell, don't ya know - these in those there fancy white robes - these are those who made it through the great ordeal!'

Today we come to All Saints Sunday. All Saints Day was actually a few days ago now but, in the church we do not want to miss the opportunity to remember and celebrate the Saints. It is one of those days that is a bit hard for us to know what to do with. It does not come with a lot of built in tradition or even a very solid understanding of who it is that all the saints are. In some sense we come to this day in the church like John standing before the throne of God asking about all those folk who are robed in white - who are they?

We have some traditional understandings - the saints are the folks who live the best of lives and now have gone through the process of beatification and moved to that point of being declared a 'saint'. Although this is not so much our Lutheran theology as that of our Catholic brothers and sisters - it is none-the-less one way in which we think of saints. More often within our tradition we take this time to name and remember the members of our church family who have 'run the race, finished the course and kept the faith' - who in death have entered into the kingdom of God and eternal life. But I really like to look at the image in the book of Revelation and see the great multitude robed in white. These are the 'saints of God' who stand robed in white because their sins are forgiven by the blood of Jesus the Christ. These are the ones who, as the text tells us, have come through the "great ordeal". They are the "faith survivors" who, even though they have been confronted by a great ordeal in life, continue to walk with Christ as forgiven sinners.

Who are those 'robed in white'. Last week 26 young people stood before us robed in white - they had all come through the 'great ordeal' - 2 + years of confirmation instruction [not to mention such things as sermon notes]. I just barely remember the experience myself and I would certainly consider it an ordeal of great magnitude. Are these the saints that we celebrate?

We just had our church council meeting - and it is budget planning time. It made me think of a cartoon in which a pastor has stopped on the street in front of his to speak with his wife before going off to the church council meeting. He is driving a tank and simply calls out to his wife. "I have a council meeting tonight - but I will not be long!' Members of the church council and committees who put in long hours planning for the life of the congregation - not all robed on white - but are these the saints?

Or I think of you all just going about your daily tasks. I suspect that you, like me, find that not everything goes just the way you would like. I read about a man who took a temporary job helping with the replacement of the chimney on a house. An hour after beginning the job he was in the hospital filling out an accident report. The report said: "Thinking that I could save time, I rigged a beam with a pulley at the top of the house and a rope leading to an empty barrel on the ground. I pulled the empty barrel up to the top of the house and tied the rope to a tree before going to the roof to fill the barrel with old bricks. Returning to the ground I untied the rope before realizing that the barrel, now full of bricks, weighed more than I do. As I hung on to the rope, I met the barrel of bricks halfway up, receiving a severe blow to my left shoulder. I managed to hang on and continued to the top where I hit my head on the beam and jammed my fingers in the pulley. Unfortunately, when the barrel hit the ground, the bottom broke, spilling all the bricks. As I was now heavier than the barrel, I started down at a high speed. Halfway down I met the barrel coming up and received a nasty blow to my legs before continuing down to the pile of sharp bricks below. At this point I must have become confused because I let go of the rope and the barrel came down, landing on my head. — I respectfully request sick leave." Having come through the great ordeal - perhaps nothing quite like this story, but certainly we could all tell stories of our own – having come through the great ordeals of life and survived - are we the saints?

I have to tell you that one of the things that makes me the most discouraged is when good, God fearing, Christian folk can not seem to grasp the depth of God love for them. To me it is so sad when we fail to see what John is saying is our 2nd lesson and in the Revelation in our first lesson. ***"See what love the Father has given us that we should be called children of God. Beloved, we are children of God now! all who have this hope in Him purify themselves, just as He is pure."*** Those standing before the throne, robed in white are not clothed in that manner because of their own righteousness or because they have had the perfect life. They have the blood of the lamb in which their robes have been washed. Forgiven in Christ's love they are - we are the saints.

We will receive many serious bumps and bruises along life's road. We will share moments of frustrations and pain. And we will have moments when either win word [as in Confirmation] or deed we will express our faith. As we hold fast to that faith through the great ordeals of life we walk forgiven - totally - forgiven and robed in white. Purified by love and assured of the truth of eternal life in Christ. Let the pain go and live in hope. Let the bumps of life fade into distant memories. Forgive and allow yourself to be forgiven for God has made you His saints and robed you in white to stand before His throne. Hold on to the faith. Live in hope and peace.

AMEN