

Clothed in White Robes
First in a Series of Sermons, “Finishing Strong”
November 5 and 6, 2022
All Saints’ Sunday

Revelation 7 - Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, “Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?” I said to him, “Sir, you know.” And he said to me, “These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore they are before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence.”

Dear Friends in Christ,

A kindergarten teacher was helping one of her students put his snow boots on. It wasn't going well. She pulled and he pushed, and the boots still didn't want to go on. By the time the second boot was on, she had already worked up a sweat. She almost cried when the little boy said, “Teacher, they're on the wrong feet.” One more time she pulled and he pushed and she managed to keep her cool as together they worked to get the boots back on this time on the right feet. He then announced, “These aren't my boots.” She bit her tongue / helped him pull and push them off / at which point he said, “They're my brother's boots, and my mom said I have to wear them / she mustered up the grace to wrestle the boots on his feet again / then she asked, “Now where are your mittens? / He said, “I stuffed them in the toes of my boots!”

Today's appointed lessons give us a vision of a place where there are no more snow boots that don't fit, no more sweating, no more frustration, only saints wearing white robes, holding palm branches in their hands, and praising their God with loud voices. A vision of a paradise where there is no more cancer, no more amputations, no more detached retinas, no more macular degeneration, no more paralysis, no more dead batteries, no more inflation, no more abortions, no more famines or failures or fighting, no more trials no tests nor tribulations, only angels and archangels and a communion of saints from every nation and language standing before the throne praising and worshiping and giving God the glory He deserves to be given.

The very purpose of the Book of Revelation is to give suffering and frustrated Christians a vision of their resurrected and ascended Lord that will help them to

persevere to the end. Finishing Strong is the theme of our last three sermons at the close of this church year. Isn't this what every good coach would tell his team as they approach the end of a close game - to finish strong? Isn't this what every good employer would urge his workers to do as they complete an important project - to finish strong? And isn't this what the Holy Spirit would counsel us to do as we approach the end of yet another church year, another calendar year, and for many of us - as we move on through the golden years towards our heavenly home - to finish strong?

Our sermon theme on this All Saints Sunday is "Clothed in White Robes." Two life lessons we would learn again today.

Lesson #1 is that Life will get worse before it gets better.

The Bible makes it very clear that this life is short and full of trouble. Already in the Garden of Eden, God warned Eve, "***I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing; with pain you will give birth to children.***" And to the man, the news was even worse, "***Cursed is the ground because of you. Through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you and you will eat the plant of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground.***"

The Bible also makes it clear that in the end times, life will get worse before it gets better. Jesus looked his disciples in the eyes and predicted, "Through much tribulation you shall enter the kingdom of God." The appointed lessons for these last three Sundays in the church year and for the Sundays in Advent will be full of references to the troubles and trials of the end times, as well.

In today's text, we hear an elder asking John who these people were, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come? John replied, "Sir, you know." And the answer came back, "***These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.***"

Some of you are old enough to remember an old tradition in the Church that only brides who were virgins were allowed to wear white. According to that tradition, some ladies had earned the right to wear white and others had not. The tradition has pretty much gone by the wayside in recent years, and in my mind - that's not all bad. Please hear me out.

On the one hand, we still teach and confess that all sex outside of marriage is adultery is to be avoided. In the midst of a society that laughs at and ridicules traditional teachings regarding marriage and family and sanctity of life and gender, we hold fast to the same doctrines our parents and grandparents handed down to us. And to be sure, we still teach the necessity of repentance and that where there is no repentance there is no forgiveness.

But on the other hand, the key issue, in terms of wearing white robes, isn't good clean living on our part, it's this matter of having our robes washed in the blood of the Lamb. To be wearing white robes signifies that the blood of Christ has cleansed us from our sins and that the forgiveness of sins has been received by faith in Jesus Christ. When you see a pastor or a confirmation student or a choir member or a bride wearing a white robe, do not imagine that their good works have earned them the right to wear white. Jesus Christ earned us the privilege by living the perfectly pure life we could never begin to live, by suffering all that which we should have suffered, by being crucified in brutal fashion until he was dead and buried on our behalf, by rising up in glorious fashion on the third day, by ascending into heaven in amazing glory on the 40th day, and by ruling all of heaven and earth with authority in every one of our days.

To be putting on our white robes each morning is to be making the sign of the cross first thing in the morning, it is to be remembering that we are the baptized and precious and redeemed people of God, it is to be fixing our eyes on Jesus as author and finisher of our faith, it is to be setting our hearts on pilgrimage and to be remembering at all times that we are but strangers here, heaven is our real home.

And so until our Lord returns or the moment of our death arrives, our assignment is two-fold. 1) Endure. 2) Help each other to endure to the end. So what is it that helps a mother in labor to endure the pain? The very real possibility that a healthy child will soon be in her arms. What is it that helps a championship wrestler to endure the weeks and months of sweating, sacrificing, and starving? It is the possibility of competing at a high level and winning the prize. What is it that helps a young parent persevere with all the challenges of raising infants, toddlers, and teenagers? It is the joy of seeing that child grow and succeed and be happy on his own in life? What is it that can help a husband and wife endure through troubled times in their marriage? It is the vision of making it through tough times and living happily ever after. What is it that helps the baptized and believing people of God endure the ups and downs of life? It is 1) daily dose of the forgiveness of sins sweeping over our souls, and 2) a vision of a much better life that is yet to come.

Lesson #2 is that The best is yet to come.

A little girl was listening to her teacher tell her class about whales and that although whales were very large it was not possible for whales to swallow a human being. The little girl raised her hand and said that Jonah was swallowed by a whale in the Bible. The teacher again said that no, it was simply not possible for Jonah to be swallowed by a whale and that it could not have happened. To which the little girl said, “Well, when I get to heaven, I will ask Jonah about it.” The teacher said, “Well, what if Jonah went to hell?” To which the little girl replied, “Then you ask him.”

All Saints Sunday is a terrific day to think about what it means to be a saint here on earth and what it means to be a saint in heaven. A saint, by definition, is one who has been declared holy. One whose sins have been forgiven. One whose robe has been washed in the blood of the Lamb. Some people think of saints only in terms of Christians who have died and others think of saints as people who have led really good lives, but both definitions are off the mark.

Either you're in Christ or you're not. Either you're still bearing responsibility for your sins, or you have been forgiven. There is no in between. Here and now we are in the church militant, and upon death, we will be transferred to the church triumphant. Here and now we live by grace. Then and there, we shall live in glory.

Loved ones who have gone on before us are in perfect peace, but we still must struggle. They know what it's like to have God wipe away their tears while we still have to help our fellow saints wipe away their tears. The saints in heaven don't have to contend any more with troubles and tempests and temptations. We do. They don't sit in nursing homes or trailer homes gasping for every breath. Some of us do. They don't have to drive to hospitals for chemotherapy and radiation and treatment for a thousand and one ailments. Some of us do. They don't live with arthritis and old age and aches and pains and broken marriages and broken hearts and broken fences and dashed dreams. Many of us do.

In closing today, I invite you to think of life as a marathon race and what it means to finish strong. As Paul approached his last days on earth, He wrote to his spiritual son Timothy, ⁶ *For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come.* ⁷ *I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.* ⁸ *Henceforth there is laid up for me the*

crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing.

Two stories in closing today, with two lessons to be learned about finishing strong.

Story #1 is of me finishing my first of two marathons about 12 years ago or so. Notice I didn't say that I ran a marathon or that I sprinted a marathon or even that I finished the race strong. I just said that I finished it. At about mile 20 or so, my legs cramped up, and a runner came up behind me and hollered out, "Dude, your leg is messed up." The last six miles or so were a combination of walking, limping, jogging, and sort of stumbling over the finish line, where I proceeded to rejoice and hyperventilate simultaneously. The main lesson I learned that day - I needed to train more diligently and for a longer period of time if I was going to finish strong instead of merely finishing.

Story #2 is of my mom who spent the last few years of her life wondering what her purposes were. And especially in the last six months, after dad died, as she lived her final days in a memory care unit, where she needed more care than ever before. With tears in her eyes, she would wonder if anybody needed her any more. And in fact, a woman whose name I forget did need her. This woman would cry out for help at all times of the day and night. She would cry loud and she would cry hard. My mom was so distressed by this woman who was crying out. She would pray and she would cry. She would go to this woman's bedside and hold her hand until a nurse could arrive. Many times, the aides would have my mom walk with her to the dining hall and sit next to her and help her to stay calm. Lesson #2 - We can be confident that in the final chapters of life, not only will Jesus Christ never leave us nor forsake us. He will have significant assignments for us to carry out. In Jesus' Name. Amen.