

The Feast of All Saints (Observed), November 6, 2022

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Saints Not Alone

Revelation 7:9–17

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Eph 1:2

In the reading from Revelation, St. John describes the vision he received of the saints: **“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, and crying out with a loud voice, ‘Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!’”** . . . One of the elders asks, **“Who are these clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?”** His answer: **“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”** (vv 9–10, 13b, 14b).

Over the past three weeks we’ve touched on Scripture alone, grace alone, and faith alone. Today I wish to start with another “alone,” another *sola*. This one doesn’t come from the Reformation. It isn’t about the Bible or theology. Instead, this one comes from a sociologist named Robert Putnam. In one of his books, he describes a particular problem of our times as the fabric of society comes apart. His title says it all: *Bowling Alone*. Solo bowling. With emphasis on the adverb: *alone*.

Loneliness has become an epidemic. And it’s even worse today than it was twenty years ago, especially worse over the last thirty months. We’re more alone than ever. You’ve noticed it, I’m sure—in a waiting room, at a restaurant, on a walking path. Two people together, maybe even at the same table, yet entirely alone—alone with the blue light of a screen.

Christians also suffer from loneliness. Here I don’t just mean the general loneliness of our modern world. Many of us, of course, suffer that too. But I mean spiritual loneliness—*isolation from others because of our faith*. Because we believe in Jesus and follow him. We find it hard to be alone but sometimes even harder and lonelier to be a Christian.

What do I mean? I think of our friend Bishop Juhana Pohjola of Finland. A year ago he was here and talked about being on trial for “hate speech” because he holds that marriage is between a man and a woman. One court acquitted him, but the prosecution has appealed to a higher court. I think of Christians in Pakistan and Iran who face hostility and persecution. I think of our missionaries—men, women, families who uproot their lives to serve far from those they love for the sake of the Gospel. They treasure Christian fellowship and the Sacrament of Christ’s body and blood on the rare occasions they have them.

And I think of you—our youth in junior high and high school, our grown children in college, our public-school teachers, you in your workplace and community. Can you openly be a Christian without being mocked? Do you have Christian friends? Who will support, encourage, and challenge you to be faithful to Christ? I think of you—you wives, usually *wives*, who come to church alone with kids but without your husbands. And of you who are single, widows and widowers, the new visitor.

Do you feel it, too? Do you feel alone *as a Christian*?

You are *not* alone in this. There’s someone else who felt the same way. Many, in fact, but one who comes to mind today: St. John, **your brother and partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Christ Jesus** (Rev 1:9). St. John who **was on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus** (Rev 1:9), which probably means that Patmos was the last place he wanted to live and the loneliest place you could imagine. People didn’t go there for vacation. They went there for exile. At least John didn’t have to go through what the other apostles went through—being flayed, crucified, stoned, beheaded, and so forth. By the time John was on Patmos, Peter and Andrew, James his brother, Philip and Bartholomew, Thomas, James the less, Matthew, Thaddeus, Simon the Zealot, and Matthias had all been martyred for their faith. That’s how alone John was.

So from exile, **in the Spirit on the Lord’s day**—and what’s worse than being a Christian alone on Sunday!—St. John shares with us the revelation given to him by Jesus. What does he see in that moment when he feels so alone, like the last Christian on earth? He tells us: **“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, and crying out with a loud voice, ‘Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!’”** (vv 9–10).

Jesus pulls back the curtain for St. John. He lifts the veil. And John sees—John sees what he'd never seen before but would most definitely see again. He sees eternity. He sees the life of the endless world to come. He sees what was and is and forever will be: the saints triumphant clothed in bright array—so many, many saints, from so many, many places and so many, many times, even—believe it or not!—our own. The saints not crucified or slain or curled up in fetal position alone and afraid but standing, standing together and wholly alive. Just like the Lamb who'd been slain but now stands, the first to rise from the dead.

If loneliness is a foretaste of hell, then communion is a foretaste of heaven. And John has it—has it even when exiled to an island for his faith. He has it even when no other Christians are near. There on the Lord's Day he worships in the communion of the saints and in the fellowship of those who belong to Christ Jesus. A great cloud of witnesses surrounds him, surrounds us. What defines the saints? Not what they did—though, by faith, they did many courageous and wonderful things. It's what they wear and how they sing and who they worship.

One of the elders asks John, **“Who are these clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?”** John shrugs. “You know.” So the elder tells him: **“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”** (vv 9–10, 13b, 14b).

Something dark stands behind all that white—the dark of tribulation, great tribulation. The dark of standing alone on earth, though not alone in Christ. The dark of blood poured out. And behind their blood, the blood of Christ Himself.

You are *not* alone. But someone else was. Someone was more alone than you or John will ever be. More alone because of who *He* was than you are for being a Christian. You can see Him alone—praying alone in a garden while his best friends slept. Some friends they were! Alone with a bitter cup to swallow. Alone when they came for him with swords and clubs and everyone else scattered. Alone standing trial before a hostile priest, a mocking king, and an indifferent governor. Alone as he was mocked, whipped, spat upon, crowned with thorns. Alone in hanging upon a cross innocent. Alone in giving His body and pouring out His blood. So alone that He cried out, **“My God, My God, why have you forsaken Me?”** (Mt 27:46). And then, having breathed His last, laid alone in a new grave.

If that's where it ended, we really would be alone, and John really would've been alone on the island of Patmos. We would be **of all people most to be pitied** (1 Cor 15:19). But having suffered alone and died alone and paid for our sins alone, Jesus rose again on

the third day. The Lamb, who was slain, is standing! And He appeared to the disciples in their loneliness. He restored them with His word. He declared to them His peace. And He sent them out in His name to forgive sins, to baptism, and to serve His body and blood in Holy Communion. He gave them this promise: **“Behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age”** (Mt 28:20).

He sent them out into the great tribulation, even to suffer, but with this promise: **“I will never leave you nor forsake you”** (Heb 13:5). That promise is yours as well. To remind us that we are not alone, we have All Saints Day. We have our Lord Jesus Christ on the throne and the great cloud of witnesses around us, many of whom we will name today in our prayer of thanksgiving—saints who have gone before us, saints to whom we can look with joy and thanksgiving because we belong with them.

DEAR SAINT, YOU ARE NOT ALONE, AND IN CHRIST YOU NEVER WILL BE.

A Lutheran pastor named Wilhelm Löhe wrote this about the communion of saints:

“To me it is such a joyous thought that I am not alone, that I do not travel by myself, but that I am accompanied on my pilgrimage through the valley of the shadow by a communion of believers. Right in the midst of this life’s barren wilderness, this thought can dissolve all sorrow in forgetfulness. Yet, this Communion of Saints is no mere thought but an unshakable certainty. I know from the mouth of God that I am not alone. I rejoice over this from the bottom of my heart. Unfortunately, though, my joy is not unmixed with sorrow, for death takes away many whom I love. Like candles, one after another in the bright circle of my friends goes out, the empty places turn dark, and seldom does another star fill the dark void. This brings pain and longing. But I do not forget that these brethren of whom I speak are just hidden from my sight and have been placed in higher positions in the Kingdom of God. Those who live in the Lord and those who, while out of the body, abide in Him; those who are still pilgrims and those who are already home; those who walk by faith and those who walk by sight—these are not two separated flocks, but one: one before God . . . in Christ Jesus.”
(Wilhelm Löhe, *Three Books About the Church*)

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, we walk by faith. We are still pilgrims. We live in the Lord here. But we are not alone, for we are surrounded by this great communion of saints. We have one mediator, one high priest, Christ Jesus, our Lord, but those who have their eyes fixed on Him are many. Many of us who are sheltered by His presence. Many of us who belong to His flock. Many of us whose tears He has already begun to wipe away. So let us follow the saints. Follow them in faith. Follow them in good works.

Follow them in receiving God's grace. Press forward with them having our eyes fixed on Christ. Wear the white robes of Christ's righteousness. Raise the palm branches high. And lift your voices with all the saints, saying: "**Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!**" For with them, in Christ, we are never alone.

The peace that passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

Phil 4:7
