

## **ALL SAINTS SUNDAY | NOVEMBER 7, 2021**

ISAIAH 25:6-9 | PSALM 24 | REVELATION 21:1-6A | JOHN 11:32-44

Reading the book of Revelation can often feel like hearing about someone else's dream. The imagery is all very impressive, and it clearly meant something to this person. But to you it mostly feels like a random string of one thing after the next, and you're really not sure what to make of any of it.

But instead of just shrugging Revelation off entirely and heading for more familiar territory—today's gospel reading is awfully tempting—we might gain something by taking a step back from the details and getting the bigger picture. And, as it just so happens, All Saints Sunday turns out to be a particularly good vantage point to get a better view.

To understand Revelation a little better, it helps to understand a couple of concepts that its first hearers took for granted. The first is that the book of Revelation belongs to a category of literature called “apocalyptic literature.” The other book of the Bible we fold into that category is Daniel. Ask most people on the street what “apocalyptic” means and the answer you're likely to get is that it has something to do with the end of the world. Which is half right.

Apocalyptic literature is about the “end” times, but it's a different kind of end. Not “end” as in “beginning and end,” but “end” as in “means and end.” End as in “goal” or “purpose.” Maybe you've had that experience recently where you see someone trying to solve a problem in a completely illogical way, and you ask, “What's your end game here? What are you trying to do?” And it's that “end of the world” that the author of Revelation is interested in. What is God trying to accomplish?

The second thing we need to grasp is how the authors of scripture think about time. They think about time in stages. They believed that there was a time now that was the life we all experience. Call it “normal life.” And there was a time somewhere off in the future where God would make everything right. And in the same way that you leave October behind and enter November, you would eventually leave behind the old age and enter the new one.

The resurrection of Jesus begins that new age. The kingdom of God is here. But it turns out the old age hasn't ended yet. Christ is risen, but the world is still full of sin and death. So it's almost like those two ages are stacked on top of each other. And you can guess which one is stacked on top and easier to see.

Apocalyptic literature is literature about stacked time. The word “apocalyptic” literally means the “revealing” or the “disclosure” or the “uncovering.” It's sort of pulling back the curtain to show us what's really going on. “Apocalyptic” literature isn't trying to tell you what's going to happen sometime in the future. It's trying to convey what's actually happening now.

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Today's reading from Revelation is what happens when you put those two ideas together. It gives us a beautiful image not only of what God is leading us toward, but what God is doing right now. It is a city. That's probably the most striking thing. It is not a world in which individuals go off to some other place in the clouds. In fact, it's just the opposite. The city of God comes to earth. To use the language of Jesus's prayer, the city makes life "on earth as it is in heaven." It is a city where the kingdom of God that was announced and inaugurated by Jesus is perfectly realized. This city, the author suggests, is what God's "end game" is.

It is a city recognizable for what it lacks. It is a city with no violence. No hunger. No shortage of homes. No abuse. No shootings. No disasters. But the city isn't empty. Just the opposite. It is a city filled with people, with the entire communion of saints. And it is that communion that we celebrate today.

In his book on the Apostles' Creed<sup>1</sup>, Ben Myers observes that Jesus never wrote any books. Never founded any non-profits. Never left any super specific instructions for how to live after the resurrection. Never left any proofs for the existence of God. Instead, he gathered together a group of people whose lives were formed around his bath, meal, and prayer, and sent them into the world.

That community is charged with witnessing. They provide us with evidence that a life of discipleship, of following Jesus to God the Father through the power of the Holy Spirit, is worthwhile. That we can take up residence in the city of God even while we live surrounded by the first things.

Saints are not people who live impossibly upstanding lives or achieve great spiritual success (whatever that might be) or even people who are supremely religious. Saints are simply individuals who, through their baptisms, reveal the city of God among us. Who live, to use the term properly, "apocalyptically," uncovering the presence of God among us underneath all the chaos that fills our lives.

And these people reveal, pull back, the curtain on ourselves, too. They don't simply impress us with their lives but lead us to greater faith in the power of our own discipleship and witness. They lead us to see how the "ends of God's world" are present in our own lives. That Anglican Sunday school song has it exactly right:

"They lived not only in ages past;  
there are hundreds of thousands still;  
the world is bright with the joyous saints  
who love to do Jesus' will.

You can meet them in school, or in lanes, or at sea,  
in church, or in trains, or in shops, or at tea;  
for the saints of God are just folk like me,

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<sup>1</sup> Benjamin Myers, *The Apostles' Creed: A Guide to the Ancient Catechism* (Faithlife Corporation, 2018).

and I mean to be one too.”<sup>2</sup>

So today we give thanks for the witness of the new saints, the recently baptized who will enrich our common life. And we give thanks for those who have died in Christ, revealing the mercy of God to us in their own particular stations of life. That we are part of a people who are bound together in the body of Christ not simply across cultural, racial, economic, or historical barriers, but even across death itself.

For the saints of God are just folk like me, and I mean to be one too.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor

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<sup>2</sup> “I Sing a Song of the Saints of God,” Hymnary.org, accessed November 1, 2021, [https://hymnary.org/text/i\\_sing\\_a\\_song\\_of\\_the\\_saints\\_of\\_god](https://hymnary.org/text/i_sing_a_song_of_the_saints_of_god).