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## All Saints' Day

Allen Jorgenson<sup>1</sup>

### Text: Revelation 7:9-17

**G**race and peace to you, dear friends. Today we mark the holy day of All Saints, which is of course rooted in the ancient religious celebration of Samhain. For the ancient Celts, this day was especially potent; a time when the barriers between the physical and spirit world were permeable, and the visitation of both monsters and ancestors. All Saints' Day represents an attempt by Christianity to rein in the excess of the festival, but to little effect.

Halloween remains a potent reminder that All Saints' Day is the child of Samhain, not the inverse. Something of the DNA is present in the festival, and perhaps we see a bit of that in this apocalyptic vision of John's gospel. Boundaries are crossed in this remarkable book, and it is full of oddities to our modern sensibilities. Angels and dragons; heavenly creatures with multiple eyes and likened to lions and oxen and eagles and humans; as well as the Lamb and Satan, Babylon and Jerusalem. And the text is full of frenzied energy.

Today's text might seem like a bit of an oasis with its vision of the redeemed gathered before angels, and elders, and living creatures all worshipping the Lamb on the throne. But make no mistake, this oasis lies smack dab in the midst of chaos. Well actually, chaos isn't really the right word.

Scholars recognize that Revelation actually has some clear patterns: it starts with a message to seven churches, urging faithfulness in the midst of persecution. It then repeats three cycles of seven: seven seals; seven trumpets; and seven bowls of woes all announcing events of God's judgment. Near the end of each of these cycles of seven there is an oasis like today's, and at the end of these seven cycles is a huge battle in which Satan and his forces are defeated, ushering in a heavenly vision that replicates the three oases. Along the way, God's sovereignty over heaven, then earth, then the abyss is demonstrated.

So today's oasis is exactly that: a stop along the way. The book of Revelation cycles through violence until violence and death are finally destroyed. But from the vantage point of chapter 7, there is a long way to go.

There is a long way to go. We can all relate to that. Some of us thought COVID-19 would be gone by now. Some of us used to hope that a certain election south of the border might settle some of the global uncertainty that contributes to a low-grade, persistent anxiety. Some of us dream that we might wipe away racism with a book, or a class, or a course, or a program. But no, in the same way that the seventh seal is followed by the first trumpet and the seventh trumpet is followed by the first bowl of woe, evil is not vanquished so easily. Folk wisdom might say that there is nothing new under the sun. COVID-19 is an echo of the Spanish Flu, which is an echo of the Bubonic Plague.

Scholars might say that the question of whether time is cyclic or linear is wrong-headed; it is both. Just like Samhain comes around every year, so do the oases and the deserts

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<sup>1</sup> Rev. Dr. Allen Jorgenson is Professor of Systematic Theology and Assistant Dean Psychotherapy at Martin Luther University College. This sermon was preached at Keffer Chapel in Waterloo, Ontario on November 4, 2020.

of our existence. But according to Revelation, it is not only this. Time isn't only cyclical in the Bible, but it also has an end in both senses of the word: both a completion and a purpose, and that is found in the beautiful description of the new Jerusalem at the end of time, where there is no temple because God is described as the temple. Much of the language of Revelation 21 and 22 are found in these oases passages in Revelation 7, 14, and 19. But there is a small difference. Let me read again for you from verse 15:

For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship God day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them. They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd.<sup>2</sup>

Two things are worthy of note: first that unlike the end of Revelation, there is a temple here. But the second thing worthy of note is a bit more subtle. In the NRSV we read that God will shelter them. The verb translated "shelter" literally means to dwell, and is related to the Greek noun for tent, or tabernacle. The Lamb sets up a tent in this passage. For the original hearers of this text, who would have been Jewish with knowledge of Greek, this would have brought to mind the image of the tabernacle in the wilderness.

It is important to remember that in the Hebrew Scriptures there were two kinds of temples. There was the temple in the wilderness that was a tabernacle or tent: a mobile temple on the move. And there was the great temple in Jerusalem. Likewise, in the book of Revelation there are two temples: the temple that is a tent in the oases and the temple that is God at the end of the book. The faithful are moving through these trials just like the people of Israel moved through the wilderness on their way to the promised land.

The faithful in the first testament and the faithful in Revelation were moving through the wilderness. You too are moving through the wilderness. Right now your wilderness might be a semester from hell; right now your wilderness might be conflict at home; right now your wilderness might be an illness, or unemployment, or just plain old sadness because you are sick and tired of masks, and cancellations, and lost opportunities.

We are all moving through one wilderness or another, and in this wilderness there is no permanent temple. There is no certainty, there is no surety. But there is a tent; there is a place where we can find succour, where we can find bread for the journey; where we can find rest for the next day. And you are in that place, you are in that temple right now, you are in chapter seven right here, right now in Open Door, celebrating All Saints.

Today we celebrate, and remember, and recall, those who have passed on and who await us at the end of the Revelation. But we are still in the seventh chapter. We have a long way to go. We have much justice to work for. We have many acts of kindness to attend to. We have a long way to walk in humility with our God. And so we need to take some time to enter the tent, the tabernacle, the oasis. And surprisingly, here in the tent, we sometimes meet those who hunger no more; sometimes in this oasis we encounter those who thirst no more; sometimes we encounter visitors from the end of Revelation, because they rest in the bosom of the Shepherd-Lamb whom we meet in the tent. And here, in the tent, those whom we mourn, those whom we miss, cheer us on.

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<sup>2</sup> Rev. 7:15–17, NRSV.

I need to tell you one more thing: I think that this tent in the oasis is a big tent. And this big tent not only hosts all of us but everyone and everything that God loves – and that is basically everyone and everything. All are welcome in this big tent. All have a place in this tabernacle. And my hope is that here, in this tent, you will find exactly the resources you need to step into chapter 8 as you journey through the Revelation that is life.