

**Holy Trinity Lutheran Church
Des Moines, Wash.
November 7, 2010**

End Times / Saints Triumphant

Revelation 22:1-5

What will be the greatest thing about heaven?

1. A reminder that we don't yet know
2. An assurance that we will soon find out

Hymns: 344 – 728 - 551 - 219

All Scripture quotations from the NIV.

Revelation 22:1-5

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign forever and ever.

Tyler and Sara had a game that they would always play to occupy time whenever mom or dad would haul them around in the back of the minivan. It was a game that was all about imagination. The game always started with a question and the same words always began that question, "What would be the greatest thing about..." and the rest of the question would be completed with some far off dream place. "What would be the greatest thing about Australia? What would be the greatest thing about Hawaii? What would be the greatest thing about the moon? On one of those

trips in the van, though, the question changed in just the slightest way as Tyler excitedly asked his sister, "What will be the greatest thing about Disney World?" Could you pick up the difference? Only one word was altered, but it completely changed the scope of the question. Tyler replaced "would" with "will." Tyler and Sara were no longer playing a game based on hopes, dreams and imagination. They were playing a game that would soon meet reality. Instead of wondering, they were actually about to experience Disney World. But even though they knew they were going to soon be at Disney World, the fact that they were still wondering was a reminder that they still didn't know for sure what it actually was like.

Isn't that a feeling that is common for Christians as well? Today is a Sunday that we call Saints Triumphant Day. It is a Sunday that I love to celebrate each year. I love it because we Christians are reminded through the lessons in God's Word that we get to ponder the question, "What will be the greatest thing about heaven?" This question isn't the basis for some game based on flailing hope or unrealistic dreams. We aren't answering the question, "What would be the greatest thing about heaven," as if it were a far off impossibility. In a world full of uncertainties and worries, today we get to ponder something that is sure. We are going to experience heaven. Our belief in Jesus' death on the cross and his resurrection give us that assurance. We know what his work brings us. It makes us saints triumphant already on this earth.

On a day when we get to consider, "What will be the greatest thing about heaven," there might not be a better place to turn than to the Revelations of the Apostle John. Held captive on the island of Patmos, the Alcatraz of his day, John was given the glorious vision that answered that question, "What will be the greatest thing about heaven?" We praise God that he led John to write down what he saw, allowing saints throughout the ages to read and picture their triumph. As we flip through the pages of Revelation, especially looking at the 21st and 22nd chapters, what we

read can hardly be imagined by our human minds. We are told of crystal walls surrounding a city made entirely of gold. We hear about gates made out of precious stones. We read about a crystal clear river of life that feeds the tree of life which produces different fruits that give life and healing to the nations. It is wonder after wonder. But those incredible sights would not be John's answer if you asked him, "What will be the greatest thing about heaven?" His answer is there for us in Revelation 22, but it is tucked in there, words that are easy to overlook. John says simply in verse 4, "They (meaning the saints) will see his face."

As we ponder those words, we can't help but be reminded that we don't yet know what that truly means. To see God in all of his glory is something that is completely beyond our imaginations. Close your eyes and imagine for a moment what that might be like. It's hard for me to picture anything more than a bright, shining man sitting on an elaborate throne surrounded by what we perceive angels to look like. It is simply impossible for us to imagine how truly great it will be to be able to see God as he is.

It is impossible because sin continues to be in this world and in each of our lives. As long as we are on this earth, we will see the effects of sin. We see it in sickness and pain and hunger. Sadness and loneliness are all around us. We don't have to look hard to find desperation and hopelessness. All of those troubles are the result of sin. As long as sin continues to be in this world, God's glory cannot be fully present or fully comprehended. Even when Moses went up on the mountain to receive the commandments from God, he did not fully experience God's glory. Even when the disciples saw Christ's glorious transfiguration, it was only a glimpse of God's full glory. Sin simply doesn't allow for it to be fully seen. It has thoroughly removed all people from the greatness of God's glory. God's perfection and glory do not mix with our sin and its darkness, so it is impossible for the two ever to be together. Our sin has truly separated us from God.

And because of that, our sinful nature gets us to trip up even when we are thinking about something as wonderful as our future life in heaven. When the Apostle John tells us that the greatest thing about heaven will be that we will see God, we go back to our limited imagination and doubt that seeing God's face could be the best thing about Paradise. We wonder if heaven could really be that good if the best thing about heaven is seeing a person on a throne and worshipping him for the rest of eternity.

Because that kind of heaven doesn't really do it for us, we start to think about what heaven would be like if we could make it. We think about what would make us happy. We dream about what we would enjoy doing for the rest of eternity. We imagine all the things that would give us the greatest amount of joy and pleasure. We look forward to a place where all of our pain and our sadness and our sickness is gone. Rather than trusting John when he says, "We will see God," our selfish sinful nature takes over and even ruins something as great as Saints Triumphant Sunday by making us think that our eternal dreams couldn't be satisfied in simply seeing God as he is. Sin has completely distorted our view of God so that we underestimate the greatness of his glory. Like it has always done, sin continues to wreck. And as long as sin continues to wreck, saints need to be reminded that we have no idea about the glories that wait for us in heaven. Right now, we see only part of the restoration that God has promised. We see how he has taken care of the spiritual problems that sin causes, but we have yet to see a world that is truly free from the effects of sin. But that is what we soon shall see, because God will restore paradise for those who believe and we will know.

And that is why we celebrate days like Saints Triumphant Day to remind us that even though the glories of heaven are beyond what we can imagine, they are most certainly there in our future. We find joy in the great sections of Scripture like Isaiah 65 and Revelation that stir our imaginations and get us thinking about eternal paradise. We look at those previews of

heaven and wonder what it could possibly be like. Like a movie preview that leaves us wanting to know more, that is all that God can give to humans who can't yet comprehend what will certainly be ours.

Though we can't imagine it fully, we take comfort in all the passages that remind us that we don't even know how great things will be. Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 13, **"Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully."** John tells us in his first letter, **"Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is."**

Those passages are a clear reminder of what we have and what we don't have. What we have is the assurance that we are God's redeemed children and we have all the benefits that come from being God's children. What we don't have is the full experience of all those blessings. So, these passages are encouragements for us all to continue to focus not on what is here and what is known, but on what is in our future and unknown.

We know what it is to be surrounded by sin. We know how difficult it is to constantly battle in an imperfect world. But soon we will know what it is to see the full glory of God. We will know what it is like to never have sin or darkness or any of its effects around us. Reminded of that glory that is to come, let us be filled with encouragement to patiently endure the short time we have left without the glory of God, fully confident that we will soon be surrounded by the full glory of God. It will be a sight to see!

To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy – to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forever more! Amen.