

In our Lutheran tradition, we always celebrate the feast of All Saints on the Sunday after Reformation Day (which is the 31st). But history and tradition are not the only reason we Lutherans celebrate these two days on consecutive Sundays. There is also the profound effect that the Reformation had on the meaning of All Saints' Day. That is because the church in which Martin Luther grew up had badly corrupted the true, Biblical meaning of the word saint. When the Reformation restored the teachings of the Bible, it also restored the true meaning of the word saint. Naturally, if the meaning of the word saint changes so does the meaning of All Saints' Day.

The early church began recognizing the death of the martyrs who died for the faith by setting aside a day of remembrance for them. This was a good thing. The only thing is that there were quickly more martyrs than there are days in the year. The other thing is that the early church recognized that not all the martyrs were recorded ... that there were martyrs who were known only to God. A day recognizing all saints would give the church an opportunity to praise God for the blessings that He worked in the lives of even the unknown martyrs.

Down through the years, the church strayed from the teachings of Holy Scripture. The Feast of All Saints evolved into a day not only to remember and thank God for the saints, but also to venerate and pray to the saints in heaven for various helps. The original intent of All Saints' Day faded away.

In time, some denominations declared that Saints were people who committed very few sins and did great acts of penance, thus earning themselves an express trip to heaven. These slowly became people that you prayed directly to for help back on earth. These saints became almost deities.

The Bible however, uses the word saint in a different way. When we search the Scriptures concerning the saints, we come across passages like the first reading for today. In the vision that God gave to John, he met an elder who asked him a question. One of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?" (Revelation 7:13) Perhaps John was too awestruck to give an answer so he replied, "Sir, you know." And [the elder] said to [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. (Revelation 7:14) These words bring together images from all over the Bible. It uses these Biblical images to describe the saints.

One of the keys to understanding the Bible is context. It is especially important that we use the context of Scripture interpreting Scripture when we are in Revelation. What does it mean that the saints wear robes washed white in the blood of the Lamb?

The Bible often uses the image of clothing to represent the gifts that God gives us so that we can appear in his presence with joy and not with fear. Listen to Isaiah as he praised God for the clothing of salvation. I will greatly rejoice in the Lord; my soul shall exult in my God, for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation; he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself like a priest with a beautiful headdress, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. (Isaiah 61:10)

The Bible is rich in this imagery of filthy garments representing our own sins and the condemnation we deserve because of those sins. It is also rich in the imagery of new, luxurious, clean garments representing the righteousness that we must have to stand before God without fear. The imagery teaches that we are totally helpless to

remove our filthy garments of sin, but that God, in His mercy and grace, removes our garments of sins, cleanses us, and then dresses us in His garments of righteousness.

One of the strange things about the garments of righteousness is the way in which they receive their righteousness. It is through the blood of Jesus Christ. It is as the Holy Spirit inspired the Apostle Peter to say; you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, 19but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot. (1 Peter 1:18–19)

The writer to the Hebrews also speaks of the healing power of blood; For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify for the purification of the flesh, 14how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God. (Hebrews 9:13–14)

The blood that all these passages refers to is the blood that our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ gave up when He allowed mere men to torture Him with beatings, whips, thorns, and crucifixion. He gave up His blood to death, even death on a cross, in order to purify the garments of righteousness that make us acceptable in the presence of God. In fact, they make us much more than acceptable. They mark us as dear children of God our heavenly father.

The suffering and death of Jesus Christ show that He is the fulfillment of the prophecies that point to the coming of Messiah ... especially the prophecies of all the sacrifices of the Old Testament. By the power of the Holy Spirit John the Baptist recognized this, pointed at Jesus, and declared, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin

of the world! (John 1:29) thus Jesus will forevermore be known as the Lamb of God.

Thus, the description of the saints in heaven from Revelation brings the images of the robes of righteousness and the blood of the lamb together to give us a description of the saints who will remain in God's kingdom forever. The filthy old rags of their sins have been removed, and they have been given new clothes ... clothes that have been cleansed by the suffering and death of Jesus Christ who is the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!

Now, if you are beginning to think that the Biblical definition of saint and the Biblical definition of Christian are the same, then you are right. A saint is someone whom God has declared holy for the sake of the perfect life and the innocent suffering and death of Jesus Christ. The saint receives this declaration of holiness by the Holy Spirit's gift of faith and is called to the side of Christ until the Last Day.

On that Last Day, God will raise all the dead and transform the decaying dust of our flesh into a new, immortal body. God will destroy this present, sinful earth and replace it with a new heaven and earth. There, all who believe in Jesus Christ shall join the 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!" (Revelation 7:9-10) There, we shall live with the Lamb and enjoy His presence forever. Amen