

**Sermon**  
**Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d'Alene**  
**All Saints' Sunday**  
**Sunday, November 5, 2023**  
**10am**

Text: Revelation 7:9-17

Theme: Season of Saints: Clothing of the Saints

[prayer]

Today is All Saints Sunday. On this day we lift our eyes to the faithful example of the great historic saints of the Church. We also remember today members of our church family who passed into glory this last year. Shortly we will light candles in their memory and celebration of all the everyday saints who have lit the way for us in our faith journeys.

For the next three weeks, during this special season of saints, we will explore some of the marks of everyday sainthood. What makes a saint? What clothing do they wear, what stories do they tell, what spiritual practices shape their lives?

We begin today with this vivid passage from Revelation that asks us to consider the kind of clothing saints put on. John of Patmos, who is the narrator of Revelation, is having a conversation with a religious elder. The elder asks John, "Who are these people wearing white robes, and where did they come from?" (v. 13 CEB). The question is rhetorical; the elder knows every one of the people who comprise that great multitude arrayed before God's throne. They are people who have "come out of great hardship. They have washed their robes and made them white in the Lamb's blood" (v. 14).

Our conference Methodist camps design a camp t-shirt every year. Some years the shirt is white so campers and volunteers can create a custom tie-dye. Crafts don't usually interest me, but the staff member who helped me tie-dye my shirt the other year was very thoughtful; she showed me various ways to twist the shirt to create different types of patterns in the fabric. I settled on a starburst pattern with a purple and blue ink wash. Twenty-four hours later I had a new piece of clothing.

This tie-dye has become a favorite for sleeping and lounging. It connects me to a place on this earth where I have stood in the presence of God.

How you can bleach your clothing with blood is beyond me. Like a reverse tie-dye, the multitude dip their robes in the blood of the Lamb and somehow find them turned white as snow.

This is probably not a literal washing. Revelation is full of complex metaphors and allusions that are difficult to interpret. Some believe that the robes washed in blood symbolize purification of our sin. But I would like us to consider a different interpretation. Consider instead that the washing of these robes in blood refers to our suffering for the sake of the Gospel.

When John received his revelation, the early Church was struggling against the violent oppression of the Roman Empire. In Revelation 6, the faithful huddle under the altar of heaven and they cry out to God, “How long will it be before you judge and avenge our blood?” (v. 10). This blood was shed by people the empire killed because of their allegiance to Christ. At the height of Rome’s oppression of Christians, Tertullian, an early church theologian, wrote, “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.”<sup>1</sup> In the first and second centuries the Gospel was spread in part through the sacrificial deaths of faithful Christians.

John begs us not to forget this reality. His favorite title for Jesus in Revelation is “Lamb.” John repeatedly depicts Jesus as a slaughtered lamb. Every time John refers to Jesus this way, he uses the Greek verb for slaughter, *sphazō*. And every time John refers to the victims of Rome’s oppression – victims of famine and violence and conquest – John uses that same verb, *sphazō*. What is John doing here? He is explicitly drawing a parallel between the suffering of Jesus and the suffering of his followers.

Now let me be clear: This suffering is not necessarily physical. While Jesus’s suffering on the cross *was* physical, his suffering was also *spiritual*. He suffered spiritually by demonstrating compassion. Because this is what compassion means: *co-passion* – to suffer with someone. To show compassion is to do the work of co-suffering. When we show compassion, we are choosing to suffer in solidarity with another person.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Apologeticus>

The elder tells John that the multitude before God's throne has emerged from a great ordeal. They have emerged out of suffering and into the presence of God and the Lamb. For some this suffering was not a choice; it happened to them, and they could not escape it. But for others, they intentionally chose to suffer like Jesus by joining the suffering of their neighbors. They chose to stand in solidarity with the suffering by doing works of justice, compassion, and mercy.

In Revelation, the mark of sainthood is not saying the sinner's prayer nor is it living a pure and spotless life. Sainthood does not require us to perform a miracle, not even the miracle of perfect faith. Certainly, we are called to live and love like Jesus, but it is not the perfection of Jesus that a saint imitates. A saint imitates Christ's suffering. And how does a saint do this? By imitating Christ's compassion. The followers of Jesus in every generation, by choice or circumstance, share in the suffering compassion of Jesus. If we want to wear the clothing of the saints, we will not hold ourselves apart from the suffering of others. Instead, we will choose, wherever we find ourselves, to come alongside them and share their suffering. We will choose to do this because that is what Jesus did. Jesus – the God who suffers with us.

Jesus is a companion to all who suffer. His suffering was on behalf of the whole world, whether they claim him as their Savior or not. I have been thinking about this mystery a lot as I watch the conflict in Israel-Palestine. This is a complicated and seemingly intractable conflict, and I know people have valid reasons for feeling inclined toward one side or another. We must condemn violence wherever and to whomever it occurs. But if Jesus ever takes a side in Scripture, it is the side of the suffering. And our Christian faith compels us to do the same – to take the side of the suffering, regardless of ethnic, religious, or national lines. To follow Jesus in this conflict is to weep for the loss of innocent Israeli life *and* innocent Palestinian life. To follow Jesus in this conflict is to have compassion for all of God's suffering children. To follow Jesus in this conflict is to build a world of *shalom* and *salam*. This is the spiritual mandate we have received from our God who came to earth and suffered as a Palestinian Jew.<sup>2</sup> Jesus' outstretched arms on the cross are wide enough to encompass the suffering of both sides.

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<sup>2</sup> Paraphrase of this excellent article: <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2023/10/30/jesus-jews-and-palestinians>

[pause]

The Apostle Paul commanded, “Dress yourself with the Lord Jesus Christ” (13:14). Saints dress themselves in the compassion of Jesus. To wash our robes and make them white in the blood of the Lamb is to identify with the lifeblood of Jesus, poured out for all the world. It is to embody in our lives everything Jesus stood and died for. We put on Jesus and we draw near to the despised and persecuted; the hungry and thirsty; the sick and lonely; the prisoner and the outcast.

But suffering is not the end of our stories nor the end of our mission. When our faith stops at the suffering of the cross, then we are missing half the Gospel. Jesus said, “In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world” (John 16:33 NIV). Like Jesus, our stories end in the victory of resurrection. The Good News is that no matter what tribulation we face, God always has the last word.

After the elder points out the multitude robed in white, he breaks into song:

*“They are before God’s throne,  
serving night and day in God’s temple,  
and the One seated on the throne dwells among them.*

*“And they do not hunger anymore,  
they do not thirst anymore.  
And the sun does not beat down on them,  
nor any burning heat.*

*“For the lamb in the midst of the throne shepherds them,  
and leads them to the streams of the water of life,  
and God wipes every tear from their eyes.”*  
(vv. 15-17, translation Taylor Burton-Edwards)

God makes of those who are suffering, and those who choose to stand with them, priests before His throne forever. God draws all the suffering to Himself. God’s divine presence is not only in that vision of heaven but is here in the present wherever there is suffering. And wherever God’s people practice justice, compassion, and mercy, there God is also. Amid tribulation, Jesus is still our

Shepherd, leading his suffering saints to streams of living water, wiping every tear from our eyes.

And in that eternal place where suffering is at last no more, the saints in glory are already lifting their voices and palm branches in ceaseless praise to God”

*“Victory belongs to our God  
who sits on the throne,  
and to the Lamb.” (v. 10)*

[pause]

Our great hymnwriter Charles Wesley wrote,

*Who are these arrayed in white,  
Brighter than the noonday sun?  
Foremost of the saints in light,  
Nearest the eternal throne?<sup>3</sup>*

We know who they are. And God calls us to join them, to put on robes of compassion. May we follow their example in faith and join the hymn of heaven.

Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> Entire text of tune and refrain: [https://hymnary.org/text/who\\_are\\_these\\_arrayed\\_in\\_white](https://hymnary.org/text/who_are_these_arrayed_in_white)