

“Safely Sheltered”

Revelation 7:9-17

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

One of the most commonly known rules of survival is what is often referred to as the “Rule of Threes.” Pretty simply, if you’re stranded somewhere, you need to find 3 critical things: shelter, water, and food (in that order). It’s estimated that the human body can survive up to 3 weeks without food, up to 3 days without water, but, depending on conditions, only up to 3 hours without shelter. There’s a true story from 1965 about 6 young boys from the island of Tonga who got caught in a storm while traveling home. They had to travel across a short stretch of ocean to get to school every day, and on this one there was a storm that tossed them about and they ended up lost at sea on their adrift boat. After about 8 days of no food and drinking rain water they caught in coconut shells, they were stranded on the remote island of Ata, 1,000 miles from the nearest other land. Dehydrated, hungry, and exhausted, when they arrived on the island, their first priority wasn’t to satiate their hunger or quench their thirst, but to secure a shelter. They climbed a cliff face that day and found a cave to sleep in for the night, and then over the next several days they built crude huts out of driftwood and palm fronds, leaving them safely sheltered as they awaited their coming rescue 15 months later.

There are many things that we need in this life, and our Lord has promised to provide them for us in our daily bread. But what should we be looking for as we prepare for what’s to come at the end? Do we first secure our earthly needs and desires, or do we first secure our shelter? Temporary shelter is not something we seek as Christians. We are not like the young boys who know they are only there for a short time as they await their rescue, building protective barriers to shield us from the harsh world around us, but we seek an eternal shelter, one that is prepared for us by our Father in heaven and is ours already by faith. In our text this morning, John sees the great multitude of the heavenly host—the saints of all time and all the angels—and they seek nothing more than to praise the one who is their eternal shelter. That is what the elder tells John in verse 15 when he hears, “Therefore they are before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence.” They dwell already, safely sheltered, in the presence of our Almighty God, shepherded by the Lamb in the midst of His throne for eternity.

Shelter in this life is absolutely a necessity of the body, and one we all strive to maintain (or build). But it is not the one thing needful as it is made out to be in the world today. One’s home according to worldly standards cannot simply be a place of rest and

Rev. Josh A. Killion
Trinity Lutheran Church - Austin, Texas
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safety. Its opulence, or lack thereof, has become the most important thing. It's a status symbol and proof that you've got your life all figured out. Something tells me that those boys I just told you about weren't concerned with marble floors, granite countertops, or how big their outhouse was going to be. None of this, though, is meant to make you not enjoy the "finer things" in life. If the Lord has provided you with the means to live in ultra comfort and elegance, take advantage of His gifts. But the problem with society is that those "extras" have become nothing in terms of gifts from God. They are results of their hard work and their sacrifices. All of those are reasons for the good things in their life, but they are not the source.

Those things are the means by which God has blessed you with His gifts. He calls you to work in the vocation He has given you, and the work you perform in those vocations leads to good things and worldly gain. Where the world loses it is they take out the part where everything flows from God, even their ability to work hard and make sacrifices for the benefit of their life on earth. Worldly shelter, no matter how exorbitant or simple, is a gift of God to care for His saints as they traverse the world as the strangers we are. We are strangers even in our own homes because it is not the place we are meant to dwell forever. We are meant to dwell with Him in eternity. That's the whole reason He created us and gave us the gift of life. He seeks our eternal companionship, and in the meantime, we are simply sojourners, like Abraham, until we join all believers—the whole pilgrim throng—past, present, and future, who stand before the throne and raise their loud voices as one.

Think about that. What John is seeing when he lays his eyes upon this host of heaven in our text is so expansive that it cannot be numbered. Our human mind can't comprehend that. The infinite number of souls that are present before the throne of the Lamb is just like what was promised to Abraham, as infinite as the stars. The Lord told him in Genesis 15:5 to "number the stars, if you are able to number them. Then He said to him, 'So shall your offspring be.'" And of course, the stars are so numerous it is impossible to number them. That is the best illustration we can have of what John sees in his vision. That promise is a foreshadowing of all that John sees in the final revelation of the Lord. All of Abraham's offspring—all those pure of heart, as we read in our Gospel lesson—are standing in the presence of God where they belong, safely in the shelter of their Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

And as we sojourn this earth, the Lord does not leave us "exposed to the elements" to endure it without protection. He has given us a place of comfort, rest, and safety to come together and seek His shelter. Here in this place as we receive His Divine Service to us, we can rest, recharge, and be prepared to face the challenges of walking in this sin

darkened world. God doesn't make us fend for ourselves. He strengthens us by His means of grace, giving us sacramental shelter from the devil and his attacks. We rightly call the Lord's Supper in which we receive His very body and blood the medicine of immortality, but it is so much more than just that. As we receive His crucified and risen body and blood in, with, and under the bread and wine, we receive His protection from all evil. By the forgiveness of our sins which He brings to us we stay shielded from the evil intentions of the world, because they cannot touch what He has given to us.

He has given us life, eternal life in Him, and that salvation which He has won for us and given to us in His Holy Supper is concrete and unchangeable. It is protected for us by His blood which we receive in faith, and partake of with the whole host of heaven that sings around His throne. While the partial has passed away for them and they have the fullness of His meal on the front side of Christ, we share in the very same meal at this rail from the backside. We and all who come to the table of the Lord see Christ, really and truly, in the elements of this meal, and those who dwell on the other side see and partake of Him in the fullness of His glory. That is what this sacramental shelter gives us in this life. It holds us in the one true faith unto life everlasting so that we will attain our eternal shelter that awaits us when we too win the victor's crown of gold.

While those who have gone before are no longer seen before our eyes, in faith we see and hear them every time we gather here. They are present and singing in every hymn, every liturgy response, and in every morsel of bread and drop of wine. We are all together the body of Christ, and that is something that can never be separated. They are forever connected with us, now by faith, and then in joyous reunion as we gather with them in the worship of the Lamb on His throne. What a joyous day that will be! Our days of sorrow and pain will be gone. The fear of the world and the devil's evil will pass away, and our eternal shelter will be attained. No tear will remain, and no sadness lurk in the shadows. As we dwell in the light of His glory with all the saints and angels, with our loved ones who have gone before us, and the whole martyr throng, nothing but His love will envelop us and permeate our every thought, safely sheltering us there for all eternity.

Physical shelter in this life is a necessary need of the body, and one that our Lord graciously provides for us as He gives us our daily bread. But what it provides for us here on earth is fleeting and temporary. The shelter our Lord and Savior, the Lamb who was slain, provides for us is very real and very permanent. It is eternal rest in His almighty presence, dwelling with all the saints who have gone before us in the temple of His grace. That dwelling place that He has gone to prepare for us holds the blessed angels and all those whom we love that have passed into its heavenly glory. What we know only in part, they now know in full measure, as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13:12.

The dim mirror we see into, they see face to face, in full bliss and eternal love. Every tear has been wiped away from their eyes, while ours still flow as we think of our love for them. But even those tears are not forever.

The day is coming when we will be reunited with them in our heavenly home, no longer sojourning here on this earth, partaking in the heavenly glory of our everlasting God. Every tear which we now weep will cease, because nothing but pure unadulterated joy awaits us as the children of God. We will join those we love and the entire throng of saints as we sing together with them, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb....Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen (Rev. 7:10b, 12).” Whether by our own passing into the heavenly glory, or by the sound of the triumphant trumpet at the coming of Jesus Christ, that truth belongs to you and comforts you in all your sadness, trials, and fears. You are God’s saints who will one day rest from your labors just as those who already rest from theirs and await the resurrection of the last day when the full consummation of the Lamb’s salvation will be inaugurated. On that day we will see of what we sing in our closing hymn:

The golden evening brightens in the west;
Soon, soon to faithful warriors cometh rest.
Sweet is the calm of Paradise the blest.
Alleluia! Alleluia! Amen.