

November 6, 2022
Text: 1 John 3:1-3

All Saints' Day (observed)

Today, on our observance of All Saints' Day, we rejoice and give thanks for all the saints who have gone before us, those redeemed by Christ and brought into His eternal rest. We give thanks that they belong to God, that they are His.

Yet as we reflect on this, the devil, the world, and our sinful flesh attack us with doubt and uncertainty. How can we be sure that those who have died are in fact with God in heaven? What about those times in our lives when we don't feel like God is there? What is our source of hope when confronted with things like death?

Thanks be to God, He addresses these concerns and defends us from these doubts through His holy word. As He reveals by His Spirit through St. John's first epistle, we have a sure hope, both for those who have gone before us and for ourselves as well.

As God's word tells us, our hope, our confidence, and our comfort are grounded in God's incredible love. John writes, "See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are."

It is this love that the Father has for us that leads Him to save us. Nothing we've done, nothing we've earned, nothing we deserve. It all comes from the love of God.

Anything else would be uncertain. When we're faced with death, that of our loved ones, and our own death as well, the devil loves to come to us and ask, "Is that person really good enough to have made it into heaven?" "What about those things from the past, those sins he did; has he done enough to work them off?" "Have you done enough for God to let you in?"

There are two ways to answer such doubts. The first is to lie and say "yes" to those questions. If you've ever been to a funeral of a non-Christian, you've heard this a lot.

There will be lots of eulogizing, praising all the good works the person did, what a great person they were, how they never did anyone any wrong, they never knew a stranger, and so on and so forth. Lacking will be any talk about Jesus and His saving death and resurrection, because the person was so good that they've just got to be in heaven.

This is all done to paper over the reality that the person is dead. It's there to try to soothe the consciences of the survivors who are being accused by the law written on their hearts and to deny the reality of sin's consequences that are on full display in the casket or urn in front of them.

It's all self-deception. John also writes in this epistle the familiar words, "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us."

No, there's nothing in us that can grant comfort or assurance. Rather, these are found in God, in His perfect, unchanging love for each and every one of us. That love caused Him to send His only-begotten Son to pay for our sins.

All those doubts and worries raised by Satan are silenced at the cross, where God's love in the flesh – Jesus – laid down His life for us. We don't deserve such an amazing gift as sinners, but as the Bible tells us, "God shows His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

Because of this love of God in Christ, we are reconciled to God; we are given peace with Him. He brings us to Himself, gathers us into His house, makes us His children. Again, St. John reminds us that this wonderful love of God leads Him to call us His children.

And these words of God are not empty words. No, when God speaks, then that's the way it is. Reality itself must conform to His word. That's why John says, "...that we should be called children of God, and so we are." When God put His name on you in Holy Baptism, He adopted you into His family, gave you His family name. It's as He said through the prophet Isaiah, "I have called you by name. You are mine."

This unshakable word of God gives us our hope and confidence. And as we heard in last Sunday's Gospel reading, we must abide, remain, in this word constantly. Why? Again, the devil is constantly attacking us, trying to lead us into despair.

He can't steal us out of God's house; the only way we go back outside is if we choose to leave. But that doesn't stop Satan from trying to lead us to doubt God's love for us, to make us think we might be better off outside God's house. And where or when do you suppose Satan really tries to stir those doubts? At death. At the graveside of a loved one, or at their bedside while they are dying.

As we stand there, perhaps looking at the body of our loved one at the visitation, it's real easy to wonder why God lets this happen. If God loved this person – a grandparent, a father or mother, a husband or wife, a son or daughter, a friend – why did they have to die? Jesus won the victory over death and the grave, so why must Christians still go to their graves? If the Almighty God truly has made us His children, why must we suffer in this life?

These are questions we can't fully answer on this side of glory, but God does not leave us totally in the dark. He does tell us that, as those who bear the name of Christ, we Christians will follow in the footsteps of Christ.

In being joined to Christ, we will experience some of what He experienced. We will suffer, just as Christ suffered. The Church faces hardship and persecution from the world because, as John notes, "the world does not know us (because) it did not know Him (Jesus)."

Jesus Christ is the Son of God, the Almighty One, but just looking at His outward appearance, everyone assumed that He was nothing special. We who are sons and daughters of the Most High God appear outwardly to be no different from your average man or woman. Jesus is the Lord of Life, and yet He bled out on the cross and was laid in the tomb. The dear saints of God suffer and die and then are put to rest in their graves.

It's as John wrote, "Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared." We are God's children, and not even death can change that fact. But the glorification of our bodies, their being cleansed from sin and remade in perfection, it hasn't yet appeared.

In this life, we are in a period of waiting. We're like the disciples and the faithful women on Holy Saturday. Their Lord Jesus has been crucified and buried. He had said that He would rise again, foretold this several times, but amidst all the confusion and pain and sadness of the previous days, those words of Jesus were forgotten.

When we watch our loved ones suffer, mourn their deaths, lay them in their graves, we can also forget that they are still children of God, that God has promised to raise them.

We might forget this, but God does not. God cannot. He did not abandon His Son to the grave, but raised Him on the third day, showing in bodily, visible form that He truly had broken the power of sin and death. Even though doubt and sadness had obscured the disciples' memory of Jesus' promises, He kept these promises all the same.

Christ triumphed over the grave and now sits at God's right hand, crowned with glory and might. Nothing can overcome His word or invalidate His promises. The word of the Lord proves true, always.

This word of the Lord is just as certain and true for us today, even though we don't see its fulfillment yet. God has said that we are His children, and so we are.

He has told us that whether we live or whether we die, we are His. He has told us that nothing in all creation can separate us from His love which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. All those who have died in the faith, they belong to the Lord now just as much as they belonged to Him during their earthly lives. His love for them now in heaven is the same love that He had for them on earth.

Just like how our children remain our children no matter how old they get or how far away they move, the dear saints of God remain His children, because God has said that they are His children, and so they are.

It is the word of God, which cannot and will not fail, that gives us reassurance and confidence even in the face of death, even when things seem impossible. This is the word which St. John boldly declares to us, that "we know that when He (Jesus) appears we shall be like Him, because we shall see Him as He is."

The word of God had declared that the virgin would conceive and bear a Son, and even though it seemed impossible, it happened, because God's word is true. Jesus declared that it was necessary that He suffer, die, and rise again, and despite the fact that no one had ever brought himself back to life, it happened, because God's word is true. Our Lord has declared that He will return in glory to call His people from their graves and gather them into His perfect peace, and even though the world scoffs at this and calls it a fairy tale or a quaint myth, it will happen, because God's word is true.

We, the children of God, will be like our Lord, in perfect, undying bodies, beholding our Lord as He truly is. We will be reunited with all our brothers and sisters in Christ, gathered together as John saw in the revelation Jesus gave to Him. We will not be stricken with hunger or thirst. We will be sheltered by our Savior's everlasting presence. We will have every tear wiped away from our eyes. All of us will cry out with one voice in praise and thanksgiving: "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!"

This is our hope as Christians. It is not a wishful thinking, a deluding ourselves as the unbelieving world might say. No, this is a sure and certain hope, and this hope does not delude or deceive, but purifies. As John writes, “And everyone who thus hopes in Him purifies himself as He is pure.” As we dwell on this hope, as we read and hear this hope in the Scriptures, as we receive in the Lord’s Supper a foretaste of the victory feast for which we hope, we are purified.

By the word He inspired, God the Holy Spirit removes our doubt and fear. He takes away our desires for the things of this temporary life and gives us a longing for the life to come, which will last forever. He reminds us that what matters isn’t who the world says we are, but rather the fact that God says that we are His children.

Through this purification, our doubts and fears are replaced by the love of God Himself. Trusting in this love of God, which has caused Him to make us His children, we await the day when the glory He has given to His saints will be revealed forever.

In the name of Jesus, amen.