

Death. It's something almost all of us have experienced, and it's only a matter of time before the rest of us will. It is gut-wrenching to witness a loved one seemingly slip through your fingers while you are helpless. It doesn't matter if it's quick and sudden, or a long and slow process. It doesn't even matter if you were actually able to be there in their final moments. The sudden void in your life, the silence where there should be noise, the emptiness in the space that should be filled. The phone that should be ringing; the messages that should be dinging. The simple knowledge that that person will no longer be there the next time you go home for the holidays. Grandmas, grandpas, moms, dads, aunts, uncles, sisters, brothers, spouses, children.

This is what sin has wrought upon the world. This is what that vile Satan unleashed when he tempted our first parents in the garden. And our own hands...our own hands are covered in blood too. It's the ending we deserve. Death.

And yet...and yet that is not the ending that our loving and merciful God would write for us.

"After this I looked, and behold, a 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!" "Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, 'Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?' I said to him, 'Sir, you know.' And he said to me, 'These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation.'"

The great tribulation. These, these holy ones are the ones coming out of hell on earth, where Satan continually makes war in an attempt to overthrow all that God has made and holds dear. He seeks to destroy that which God loves. He seeks to destroy us. Through trial and trepidation. Through suffering and pain. Through grief and sorrow. He seeks to wear us out. He seeks to tear us down. He seeks to turn us from the only place where he cannot reach us. "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. 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 own presence."

Beloved brothers and sisters, God made you so that He may love you. He did not create you to be the subject of scorn or wrath. He did not create you for suffering or death. He created you to be with you. It is true that your hands are covered in blood, but not the blood that your sin has wrought. No, beloved, they are covered in the blood of Christ. And not your hands only, but your head and your shoulders and your whole body. And as you wage war against the powers of this present darkness, God Himself has sealed you with His own Holy Spirit.

The same Spirit that overshadowed Mary and created life in her womb has now overshadowed you to bring your own spirit from death to life in Him, just as He brings to life all who are to believe in Jesus. And it is that same Spirit who will preserve your soul in life even as your body passes into death, just as He has preserved your grandmas,

grandpas, moms, dads, aunts, uncles, sisters, brothers, spouses, children, and all who have believed in Christ. All who have preceded us in death and trusted in Him are there now before the throne of God. The sin which had once clung to their flesh has been destroyed, and there they rest from all their labors, without any lack or need.

As we remember the faithful departed from this past year, and light our candles in remembrance of all who have gone before, we boldly confess the hope of our faith, knowing that their lives are hidden with Christ. And as they are hidden in Christ, and Christ is here with us, we gather all together as one Church. As we sing, we for a time join our voices with theirs as they continually sing before the throne. And as we receive the body and blood in the bread and the wine, we are brought for a time closer to the presence of Christ that they experience in a much greater way all the time.

For the Lamb who was slain for all our sake is their Shepherd. And He is guiding them to those living waters from which they, and we, will drink deeply together when Christ comes again. And when those waters pass through our lips we will enter eternal life. Our loving Shepherd will call us each by name, and we will follow Him out of that sheepfold of blessed rest, our spirits joined to our resurrected bodies, and we will follow Him into the verdant pastures of the new heavens and the new earth. And we cannot even imagine the glory of that final day, but we do know that we will be like Him. We will be pure, sinless, without spot or blemish. And neither sin nor the temptation of sin will ever be able to come near us. Death will be conquered once and for all. And we will be with Christ, and with each other, for all eternity. Amen.