The passage from Revelation is familiar to us as one we've often heard used at funerals. It's an appropriate passage for funerals because it reminds us that our loved one who has died has transitioned into life in a place where we worship God unfailingly and where God wipes away our tears.

This passage, though, has a meaning for our lives on earth, as well. It tells us that God is with us – his saints -- no matter what ordeals, trials, and tribulations we face. Not only is God with us, but God comforts us as we continue to strive to live the way Jesus demonstrated for us and that Jesus talks about in the Beatitudes.

This passage, and much of the book of Revelation, has been distorted a bit by our culture. When we think of Revelation, we envision spaceships and people disappearing into thin air, and we gather up all manner of other images in our minds. I'd like to give us a little background to help us truly grasp what this passage means for us now on All Saints Day in 2020.

This passage is preceded in Revelation by the opening of six seals. Five of the seals present a catastrophe falling upon the world – such as famine, natural disasters, tension in the social order and outbreaks of violence, or people being taken over by oppressive governments. One of the seals presents an image of Christian martyrs crying out for justice.

The author of Revelation was writing this book when the Romans were persecuting Christians – executing them at the hands of lions in the Coliseum. He is also writing it as the Temple is being destroyed, and as the Parthians are poised on the eastern edge of the Roman Empire (where present-day Iran is) to launch a military attack against Rome. The Parthians didn't conquer Rome as the author envisioned; however, the anxiety around that threat led Rome to put most of its resources into its military and away from programs that could help citizens struggling in a time of famine.

That brings us to chapter 7 of Revelations. Chapter 7 begins by discussing the faithful people who continue to remain dedicated to God's purposes. These people are marked with a seal on their foreheads – in ancient culture, a symbol on the forehead signals a person's identity. This marking signifies that these saints belong to God and are protected by God. They still have to suffer and struggle during the trying times, but they are sealed and secure because they belong to God.

Then, we come to today’s passage where we have a multitude of saints from all over the world robed in white with palm branches in their hands.

White, of course, symbolizes purity. The saints' robes have been tarnished through their own actions but are washed clean by Jesus so that they are pure. The robes also have been muddied by battles against those unrighteous things that occur in our culture. Now those struggles are over.

The palm branches in their hands remind us of Palm Sunday when we sing Hosanna to God in the highest. They also would have reminded the Jewish audience of an event in 165 BCE. The Jewish population in Judea had been dominated by the Seleucid [suh·**loo**·suhd] Empire. The Seleucid leader prohibited them from practicing their faith and erected a statue of Zeus in the Jewish Temple. Jewish forces under the leadership of the Maccabee family had defeated the Seleucids and reclaimed the Temple. The palms were waved then as a symbol of Jewish independence.

Now that we have that background, let's think about what this passage means for our lives now. We're indeed experiencing trials. We see people in physical, emotional, and spiritual pain. Although we in the United States are not oppressed by a foreign leader, one could certainly argue that our way of life is now threatened by a virus.

Some countries are oppressed by dictators who disallow the practice of religion. Some people are crushed either by systems or governments or by illnesses and addictions. Natural disasters are everywhere. Many places and people in the world lack proper food and adequate drinking water. Even us – middle-class folks in America – have experienced shortages of items we need during the pandemic. We are experiencing social unrest. Violence is common. Our Christian brothers and sisters in other parts of the world are being martyred for their faith; in this country, we see culture encroaching upon the sacred. Yes, folks, we're experiencing trials and tribulations.

Like the ancients, we may also cry out to God, asking when God will end evil and suffering. We, like the ancients, receive the same response, which is to be patient and continue to follow the path Jesus laid out for us no matter what tribulations happen.

We are called to be peacemakers, not take ourselves more seriously than we should, to realize that we need God. We are called to show mercy to others, to want righteousness so much that we feel hunger pangs and thirst for it. We follow Jesus so much that others persecute us for doing so.

We are saints. We are sealed. At our Baptism, we were marked with the sign of the cross on our forehead as Christ's own forever. That means we are protected. No matter how hard the trials become, God never leaves us. God comforts us.

Jesus, the Lamb, who died and rose again, is our Shepherd, who leads us. Through Him, we are safe. Because Jesus conquered death – the ultimate trial – we know that this story's ending is a happy one.

Tears and trials are never permanent. God wins. And we are safe in that victory.

# References

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