

Centuries ago, back when I was a young vicar, barely out of college, but studying for the ministry and learning the ropes, I remember a conversation I had with a guy I knew. He'd been dating a wonderful woman for quite a while, and they were getting more and more serious. He called me up one evening, and I remember him asking me, "How can I be sure that I'm really in love? How can I be sure that she's really the one?" And I recall blurting out to him, "How on earth should I know? What do I know about the nature of true love, and about whom you should marry?"

All these years later, I might be able to give a less blunt, more diplomatic answer than that. But those questions – and any questions that begin with the words, "How can I be sure?" – are still tricky, puzzling, bewildering.

How can I be sure? So often, you just can't. Life is full of uncertainties. Whether it's selecting a spouse, putting your trust in a political candidate's promises, deciding which menu item will taste best, or figuring out when this crazy pandemic is going to subside, how can you really be sure? The world we live in provides far fewer assurances than it does jolts, shocks, and letdowns.

Nonetheless, our word for today – our Lutheran word for this All Saints Day – is the word "assurance." On All Saints Day we think about our loved ones who've gone before us, those who've died and for whom we mourn. And so many, many times, as a pastor, I've heard the question – and you may have asked this question yourself on multiple occasions -- "How can I be sure that my loved one is safe in heaven?" We miss our dearly departed friends and family members. We grieve for them. Our sorrow is real. So we at least want the assurance that they're in heaven. How can we be sure?

I think that's a good question to ponder today. And our Bible reading from Revelation 7 gives us an excellent answer.

In the mysterious, cryptic Book of Revelation the Apostle John is given a series of visions of heaven. John is still alive back in the first century; but the Lord shows John several scenes from the heavenly realms.

And there's this awesome sight described in Revelation chapter 7. You heard it before. "I looked," John writes, "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!'"

Who are they? Those are the saints of God! This enormous assembly are the ones who've gone before us and are safe in heaven with God! What a beautiful picture! What a comforting image! But how can we be sure that the ones we're grieving are there? Are they in? Are they included?

Who are these, clothed in white robes? One of the heavenly elders asks John that very question. From where have they come? And John humbly defers, or maybe he's just not sure. "Sir, you know," he says to the elder. And then the elder gives the answer. John writes it down, because God told him to write it down. God wants you and me to hear the answer today. God wants you and me to have this blessed assurance today, knowing that we live in a highly uncertain world, knowing that we can't be sure about so many important things. God wants us to be sure, on this All Saints Day, of this one crucially important thing.

Who gets in to heaven? Who are these blessed people, captured in John's vision? Here's the answer, given to John, given to 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.” A two-part answer. And, friends, I think we can all relate to, and all grab hold of, both parts of this answer.

The first part is easy. “These are the ones who’ve come out of the great tribulation.” In other words, these are people who’ve been through life in this world, with all its pains and problems. They’ve lived with sin. They’ve dealt with sinners. They’ve been hurt, they’ve suffered, they’ve struggled, as we all do in this life. So maybe we all can understand why the heavenly elder labels this world of ours as “the great tribulation.”

But then comes the second part of the answer. And here’s where we get our real assurance. Who gets in the pearly gates? Who are the ones in this multitude John speaks of? “They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.”

No, it’s not laundry day up in heaven. John isn’t talking about using detergent or bleach. He’s talking about, using this white robe imagery, what it takes for our loved ones – and what it takes for you and me, and for anyone – to be part of that heavenly throng.

How can I be sure that my loved ones are safe in heaven? My assurance is based not on their record, but on their relationship with Christ. This assurance isn’t dependent on their goodness, their fidelity, their acts of kindness, or their personal spiritual cleanliness. Nor is this assurance damaged by their failings – because we all have failings -- or their faults – for we all have plenty of those. No, our assurance is based on Christ alone.

Only Jesus, the Son of God, can make a person right with God. Only Christ can open the gates of heaven. Only the Lord can make a sinful human being acceptable to God, and

welcome in heaven. Only the blood of the Lamb can make you and me, can make our loved ones, can make anyone, pure, clean, forgiven, saved.

What a blessed assurance this is! See, it's not a guessing game. It's not a competition. It's not a meritocracy. It's not passing a test, or survival of the fittest, or keeping one's nose reasonably clean. It's only about Christ! It's completely about believing and trusting in what Jesus Christ has done.

He lived and died and rose again for you, and for your loved ones. For me, and for those who've gone before me. He paid the price. He cancelled the debt. He makes us clean, and he welcomes us home.

Can we be sure? Look here (*text on screen*). Look here (*cross*), and here (*font*), and here (*altar*). Because of Jesus, because of Christ alone, you can be sure! Amen.