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All Saints' Day – Revelation 22:1-5 – Paradise Regained

11/1-5/23 – Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Beaver Dam, WI

*“Of Man’s First Disobedience, and the Fruit / Of that Forbidden Tree, whose mortal taste / Brought Death into the World, and all our woe, / With loss of Eden, till one greater Man / Restore us, and regain the blissful Seat.”* Those are the opening words to John Milton’s famous epic poem called *Paradise Lost*. With a lot of poetic license, Milton wrote this poem about the fall of Satan and his evil angels, and the way Satan went about dragging humanity down with him. Milton traced that story from the perfect creation into which God the Father placed Adam and Eve all the way down to the broken creation that we all know so well. A talking serpent came to Eve and convinced her that by taking the forbidden fruit from the tree of knowledge, she would gain special abilities that they wouldn’t have otherwise. But really, all Adam and Eve did gain by taking that fruit were the woes of life in this sinful world and the certainty of death, and they lost the perfection and harmony of life in Eden with God.

That story ends in tragedy, as Adam and Eve are escorted out of the Garden of Eden by the archangel Michael. Because of their sin, paradise was lost. But that wasn’t the end. There was hope for Adam and Eve and the rest of humanity for a restored relationship with their God, and Milton tells Scripture’s story in his sequel, *Paradise Regained*. But actually even that story isn’t complete. That story talks about Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness right after his baptism, but it doesn’t go any further. Now certainly Jesus succeeding against the devil’s temptation where Adam and Eve failed was an important part of our salvation. But the story of paradise regained really climaxes in Jesus’ cross and empty tomb, and it culminates in our reading for today. In the truest sense, this reading from Revelation really does describe Paradise Regained for God’s people, and that happens through the water of life, through the tree of life, and through connection with our Savior-God.

Our reading starts with an angel showing the apostle John a vision of the end of time. John saw a new heavens and a new earth and the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down from the sky. As the angel he was with showed him around the city, John said, *“Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city.”*

Maybe John didn’t get it at first, but Jesus used to talk a lot about how he had living water to give to people that springs up to eternal life. Maybe that was a hard picture to understand all those years before when Jesus was still here on earth, but as John looked at that holy city, there it was. The river of the water of life that Jesus promised, which flows out from the very throne of God. For people like us who fail and do wrong and stand before God with sin-stained hearts and minds and lives, the river of the water of life cleanses our sins, purifies our hearts, and *makes* us clean and holy to be with God forever.

So maybe you’re wondering, what is this supposed to mean? How do I get this heavenly water? My friends, you get that water of life from Jesus in his Word. Jesus once said, *“If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty”* (John 7:37, 6:35). This kind of water doesn’t just clean your skin – it cleanses your heart and soul, and it quenches your spiritual thirst. This water of life is the Gospel of a Savior from sin, and it satisfies our every longing for forgiveness and salvation.

This water of life comes to you in God’s Word, and even more directly this living water comes to you in holy baptism. Just as that heavenly water came out from God’s throne and brought life wherever it went, so also baptism comes with our Savior’s power and blessing to grant his gracious gifts of forgiveness, salvation, and eternal life. Through baptism, God adopts us into his family and gives us all his greatest blessings as heirs of his heavenly kingdom. That water of life which we get in God’s Word and in God’s baptism purifies us of every sin, it gives us the white robes of Christ’s righteousness, and it makes us citizens of that new heavenly Jerusalem to come one day. Through that gracious water of life, our God promises us that paradise once lost is now paradise regained.

But really the centerpiece of this new heavenly Jerusalem isn’t the river of the water of life, as important as that is. It’s the tree of life that stands on its banks. *“On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be any curse.”* Do you remember the tree of life, how it was one of the two special trees in the Garden of Eden with Adam and Eve? That was the tree that a person could eat from and live forever, and that was the tree that God barred access to after Adam and Eve fell into sin. What was once

supposed to guarantee God's blessing of life instead became a sort of sad symbol of what could and should have been if Adam and Eve hadn't instead brought the curse of death upon themselves and every one of us after them.

But here in heaven, John saw that one day we will once again have access to that tree of life, we'll be able to eat from its fruit, and we'll have life in abundance, life to the full. And that's because of a different tree of life – one that stood on Mt. Calvary. That tree won life for us when our Savior Jesus laid down his life on the cross. There Jesus bore the curse of sin that should rightly have been on our shoulders and washed away in his blood every wrong we've ever done. By his wounds on that tree, our hearts and souls were healed and made right again. Through Jesus' sacrificial death, he suffered the pains of hell that we deserved and gave us his perfect holiness and righteousness as our ticket to heaven. Through that tree of life that was Christ's cross, our Savior regained for us eternal life in Paradise and full and free access once more to the tree of life with all its richest blessings, so that means we'll never have to suffer under sin or any of its effects ever again.

And then finally, for us maybe the greatest part of this New Jerusalem will be our connection with the Lamb, our connection with our Savior, because we'll see him face to face, take his name upon us, and reign together with him forever. As John saw in his vision, "*The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever.*"

Back in the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve had a closeness and harmony with God that we just can't full understand. They could walk and talk right there with God just like you can with a friend. Their relationship was perfect, and God always meant it to be that way. But when they fell into sin, that relationship broke. Their sins separated us from God, they hid his face from us, and they left us in the darkness of fear, evil, and death, with no rightful hope to ever do anything about that on our own.

But when we get to that New Jerusalem, all that's going to change. One day again we're going to see the face of our Lord and Savior, and we'll

see him as he really is. And just like it's impossible to do justice to the Grand Canyon or the Swiss Alps (or take your pick) unless you're actually there to behold them with your own eyes, so it'll be with Jesus a thousand times over. Seeing our Savior face-to-face and meeting his embrace will put all our troubles and hurts behind us and will mean the greatest rest, peace, and welcome – it'll mean that we've finally made it home.

And when we finally do make it home, our Savior is going to put his name on us, it says – his seal of approval, his stamp of belonging that we are his and that he is ours, and nothing is going to change that. But that's not something that we still just have to look forward to. That's actually something that we already have and something we can rejoice in even now. See, through faith, we've already been given Jesus' name – Christian. Through Holy Baptism, our God has put his name upon us and marked us as his redeemed children – *in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit*. And where John says that that name will be inscribed on our foreheads, even right now our relationship with Jesus should be so obvious to everyone around that it's as if it were written on our foreheads already. We have peace and joy and love that this world knows nothing about, but we can show it to them and share it with them. We can make it known that Jesus lives in our hearts even now through faith, that he's chosen us for his own, and that he's never going to let us go – and that promise goes for them, too. Yes, when we get to that holy city, it really will be Paradise Regained – only better. Christ is going to give us the crown of life and the special dignity of kingship right along with him. We're not just going to be servants in the kingdom, or citizens, or children – we're going to be kings and queens ruling right along with the King of kings. We're going to live and reign together with him forever in the heavenly perfection that was always meant for us, and we will bask in the brilliant splendor of the Light to which no other lights can compare, that of the presence of our Lord God and our Savior Jesus Christ for all eternity.

So my brothers and sisters, on this weekend when we look ahead toward future glory and remember all the saints who have gone before us, let's marvel with John at our God's grace that saved us and let's keep our eyes fixed on our heavenly home that Jesus won for us – because through the water of life, through the tree of life, and through our connection with our Savior, that means our Paradise really is Regained. Amen.