Text: Rev 7:2-17

**Introduction**

In the beginning of the book of Revelation Jesus calls himself the Alpha and the Omega. The book also comes to a conclusion with that phrase. The reference is easily understood, but the metaphor is explained as the first and the last, the beginning and the end. And if we remember the beginning of John’s gospel, “in the beginning was the word…all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made.” Jesus as the beginning of all things is an important emphasis of John. And as all things were made by him, they all return to him. And it is this juxtaposition of beginning and end that I want to talk about today – All Saints, observed.

**Text**

Our reading from Revelation is two halves of the same vision. What John is seeing is all Israel. But what I want to suggest is that John is seeing All Israel at two different points. He’s seeing Israel at the alpha and at the omega – the beginning and the end.

The entire text is in the midst of the Lamb on the Throne opening the seven seals of the scroll. And as he opens each seal something happens to the residents of earth. And after the sixth seal is opened you have all the apocalyptic symbols: earthquakes and sun being blackened and the moon like blood. And the call of the great ones of the earth is for the mountains to fall on them for “the great day of LORD has come and who can stand?”

And interrupting that question, as an answer is this interlude.

**The Beginning**

John sees an Angel ascending from the rising of the Sun with the seal of the living God. From the rising of the sun – from the beginning. From the beginning, when the four angels who were given power to harm the earth and sea – to ruin the creation – were bound. Do not harm the earth until we have sealed the servants of our God.

It’s John’s visionary way of what Paul says in Romans. “For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son…And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.” Before any of us came into being, God knew us. And before we lived our first second, he sealed us. From the foundation of the world, the saints of God – all Israel – was marked. These, this one, is mine.

But then we get to the numbers and the names. Who and how many? The Sons of Israel the vision says and 144,000. Well great. Sounds like I’d have better luck winning the lottery.

But that’s not how this works. For two reasons. The omega, the second half of the vision, will help us understand. But before we jump to that let’s understand something about numbers and visions. Already in the Exodus Israel was greater than 144,000. This is not a census of God’s people as nations of the earth would do it. It is the sealing of All Israel.

12 is one of those number of completion. You have the 12 tribes represented here. Jesus had 12 apostles. It was important enough to have 12 that the 11 replace Judas. And if you look up the original 12 tribes and compare to the list here you’ll find something interesting. Dan has been removed and the half-tribe of Manasseh has been inserted. Manasseh was the older son of Joseph. Joseph as the older son of the favorite gets a double portion. But one that fell along the way – like Dan in to deep idolatry and Judas to betrayal – is replaced. Because the complete number is 12. If that makes sense, you might have a future interpreting the apocalyptic. If not, just accept that 12 is the full complete number. And for each tribe you have 12 multiplied by 1000. You have a full number multiplied by the largest number ancient Greek used.

Who can stand? Those God has chosen from before time.

Who? All Israel

How many? A big full number. Not one will be lost.

God has sealed them. God has sealed you. And he did this before any harm could come to his creation.

**The End**

The second half of the vision helps us. After John’s vision of that sealing is over, he looks again. And instead the 144,000 of All Israel, he sees a great multitude that no one could number. And he sees that they come from every nation, tribe, people and language. And they have a song: “Salvation belongs to our God who sints on the throne and to the Lamb.”

Who can stand? The Lamb, and all those who have been saved by him.

How many? More than anyone could count.

Who? From every group you can image.

What we saw as all Israel in picture language in the beginning, now we see the reality at the end. This is all Israel and their song.

**Christology**

Now as he’s watching this song swell from the people, to the angles and the elders and the living creatures getting closer and the closer to the throne, John gets asked an important questions. “Who are these – something that we have already guessed – but more importantly how did they get here?” And John is stumped. He’s seen all Israel turn into this uncountable throng in reality. But what is the sealing? What ensures that these people arrive here? And He begs the elder being who asked him, “Sir, you know.”

And elder tells him. “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.”

All Israel has been saved by the blood of the lamb. All Saints have been sealed by the blood of the lamb. The lamb of the Passover smeared on the lintels and doorposts that death might pass over. The blood of the lamb given to you in the sacrament. All Israel has been sealed in time by the blood of the lamb. The blood which flowed from his side on the cross. The blood of the covenants – old and new.

All Saints have their white robes by this blood.

**Moral**

Now there is one little word in the Elder’s explanation that we should here – the tribulation. In the beginning God sealed his. In the end all Israel is saved. Between the alpha and the omega stands the cross.

All Saints have picked up their cross and followed. All the saints walk through the valley of the shadow of death. All saints struggle against the devil, the world and our own sinful nature. All Saints come out of this tribulation. There were those angels that have been given power to harm earth and sea. And from that beginning until the end they have sought out God’s sealed.

The tribulation is not some special time that maybe we can avoid. All Saints have come through the great tribulation.

But All Saints – those the church remembers by name, those that might be close to your heart alone, those who maybe are only known to Christ – All Saints have come out of the tribulation because the blood of the Lamb. The have come out because God knew them before time and sealed them. The have come out because they were marked with the blood. All Saints have not passed through the tribulation by their own, but by the grace of God.

**Eschatology**

John’s vision ends with the promise. We might ask why would anyone want to go through the tribulation. As the Psalmist complains in at least one place “it would be better that I was never born.”

But this is a vision of what Paul says is to be with Jesus which is better by far.

They are sheltered with his presence. What we have under bread and wine and word, they have in full.

And they neither hunger or thrist. And we can take that as the basics of food and drink, but I think it goes deeper. All the things that we hunger and thirst for that might lead us astray from the narrow way. They don’t have a problem with. Our sinful nature…the sin which lives in our members…has been taken away. The sun shall not strike nor any scorching heat. That crucible of temptation that Satan puts us through is shall be over. The brightness shiny things of the world that we would so often trade eternity for will no longer strike our eyes. Our troubles with sin will be over.

Because the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd.

The Saints at rest have the fullness of Christ. And instead of chasing shadows and ending up at bitter waters. They have the living water. Instead of the repeated repentance over the things that I don’t want to do, and yet I do. Instead of the tears over how I have betrayed my Lord. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes.

Today we have tribulation. Today we sin and repent. Today we struggle with temptations. Today we deal with things not fully revealed.

Tomorrow there will be no questions. Tomorrow the distant triumph song that steals on the ears swells to the Amen> Blessing and power and glory…. Tomorrow, becomes forever and ever. Amen.