ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA

November 1, 2026 – ALL SAINTS' DAY, YR. A — The Rev. Dr. Nina George–Hacker

Homily: *"When the Roll is Called up Yonder"**

Revelation 7:9-17	(St. John is given a vision of God's heavenly throne)
Psalm 34:1-10, 22	(Praise for the Lord's greatness and help in troubled times)
1 John 3:1-3	(We are God's children; He loves us all)
St. Matthew 5:1-12	(Jesus teaches the Beatitudes)

In David Heller's Book, Children's Letters to God, Doris, age 11, writes: "Dear God, Do you have schools in heaven or are the angels ... born smart?" And from Bea, age 9: "How is it up where you are? I learned about you in geography. Say hi to Santa Claus." Martha, age 8, asks: "Dear God, Do you have telephones in heaven? [Here's my number.] What's yours? I get home from school about three-thirty every day. I'll talk to you."[1]

Children have questions about heaven, and so do we. What's it like? Where is it? Who goes there? Will I? How do I get there? In both the Old and New Testaments, the Bible says that heaven is God's holy dwelling place, the seat of God's throne;[2] the home of righteousness, the kingdom of light, and paradise.[3] Today's lesson from Revelation offers us a glorious vision of non-stop worship and praise to God by believers from "*every* nation, from *all* tribes and peoples and languages."

Think of it—in heaven there is no nationalism, no ethnicity, discrimination, or prejudice. The great multitude of saints and martyrs are joined by a variety of "living creatures" who perpetually worship God, proclaiming "Holy, holy, holy, the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come." Those in heaven will neither hunger nor thirst, and "God will wipe away every tear from their eyes." Revelation 21:4 further promises there will be "no more death or mourning or crying or pain." What could be more wonderful?

Best of all, we know Jesus is there, because in 1 Peter 3:22 (GWT), we read: "Christ has gone to heaven where he has the highest position that God gives. Angels, rulers, and powers have been placed under his authority." And Luke records in Acts 1:11 that after the risen Christ ascended to heaven, two angels promised His followers, "Jesus, who was taken from you to heaven, will come back in the same way that you saw him go to heaven."

Thus, heaven is an incomparable, unimaginable, out-of-this-world realm where God and Jesus are, along with the angels, mysterious living creatures, those who have been martyred for their faith, and people from all nations and races. *What a party!!* But it gets even better! In John, chapter 14, Jesus tells His followers how to get there. He says, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me." That's the ticket. Believing in God and in His Son, Jesus.

Next, Jesus describes the best real estate offer in the universe: "In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go to prepare a place for you, I will come again and take you to myself, so that where I am, you may be also." If we believe in Jesus, He will take us to heaven with Him.

Until that time, we are to live as godly people. And in today's Gospel from the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus begins to teach on just this. He opens by saying that heaven is the gift for all who humbly recognize their need for Christ, and ends by promising a heavenly reward for all believers who are persecuted for His sake. In between, Jesus assures all who mourn that they will be comforted, offers satisfaction for all who yearn for righteousness, and blessings untold for the pure in heart, and those who broker peace. Above all, we are to remain true to our faith, and whenever necessary, stand up for Jesus. But let us not be surprised if when we do, we meet with hostility.

A few years ago, a radio station ran a contest, inviting listeners to tune their clock radios to that station: "Just for fun," the disc jockey said, "when you wake up to the sound of FM-106, call and tell us the first words you spoke when you rolled out of bed. If you're the third caller, you'll win $106." It didn't take long for the contest to grow in enthusiasm. The first morning, the buoyant host asked, "Caller number three, what did you

say when you rolled out of bed this morning?" A groggy voice replied: "Do I smell coffee burning?" Another day, a sleepy clerical worker said, "Oh no, I'm late for work." Someone else said her first words were, "Honey, did I put the dog out last night?" A muffled curse was heard in the background, "No, you didn't." It was a funny contest and drew a considerable audience.

One morning, however, the third caller said something unusual. The station's phone rang. "Good morning, this is FM-106. You're on the air. What did *you* say when you rolled out of bed this morning?" A voice with a thick Brooklyn accent replied: "You wanna know my first words this morning?" The DJ bubbled: "Yes, sir! Tell us what you said." The voice responded, "Shema, Israel ... Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might." A long moment of embarrassed silence followed. Then the radio announcer said, "Sorry, wrong number"—and cut to a commercial.[4] A godly person will do what is right and glorify the Lord, regardless of how the world treats or mistreats them. And that faithful persistence and perseverance are what saints are made of.

Today is All Saints' Day, when we honor godly men and women who have gone on ahead of us to be with the Lord. We celebrate the faith and courage of the church's saints and martyrs, as we also remember those known to us personally. At the same time, it is an occasion in which to renew our faith in Jesus Christ, so that we, too, might hope in the resurrection and the life to come—when, we shall be with the Lord forever, as we are reunited with all who have died in faith.

All Saints' is also a good day to reexamine our own ideas about death, and to cast aside whatever fears about the afterlife that may have been dogging us. Ask the Holy Spirit to reassure you of Jesus' promise: that if you are a faithful believing Christian, He will take you to be with Him. There is no reason to fear that which will usher us into the glory of God's presence and the joy that He has prepared for us. Even so, some Christians are afraid of death because they feel that, somehow, they are not worthy to go to heaven. Yes, they have faith, but they think they've failed to accomplish anything great for God, and are overly preoccupied with their spiritual inadequacies. But the Bible says you are precious in God's sight—period. No strings attached.

To God, every life is precious. No one is forgotten. Every name is recorded. There's an old gospel song, "When the Roll is Called Up Yonder." That roll is what the Bible calls the Lamb's Book of Life (Rev. 21:27). Many have speculated about who will be in that number, who will be on that roll. Jesus Himself said that we'll be surprised about who's there and who's not, and there's an old African-American spiritual that says, "Everybody talking 'bout Heaven ain't goin' there."

The Bible tells us that anyone has the potential to be on that roll. It's not reserved for the well-to-do, the high achievers, or even for the super-religious or the morally exemplary. Anyone who believes in Jesus Christ, and surrenders his or her life to our Lord without reservation can be in that number, when the saints go marching in. Who else goes to heaven is not our concern. That's God's business. We're not to worry about it. Rather, we are to focus on the glory of God and the communion of saints that await us there. In Acts, chapter 7, the apostle Stephen sees this, just before his death. As he is about to be stoned violently for preaching about Christ, his persecutors are "enraged." Yet, writes Saint Luke, Stephen, "filled with the Holy Spirit . . . gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. 'Look,' he said, 'I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!" This gave him such comfort and inspiration that, Scripture records, "While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.' Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them.' When he had said this, he died.

As Christians, it is important for us to *live* our faith through good and godly lives. We should also aspire to a holy death such as Saint Stephen's, in which we commit our souls to God and ask Christ to forgive not only our sins, but those of anyone who has sinned against us. We don't have to wait until the moment of death. If we practice this devotion and humility on a daily basis, we will be saints of God, ready and waiting with confidence for that "sweet, sweet chariot, comin' for to carry me home." *Amen.*

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* Adapted from a sermon by Nina George Hacker, "Comin' For to Carry Me Home," 2 November 2003, Wesley Grove United Methodist Church, Gaithersburg MD. Used with permission..
[1] From David Heller, Dear God: Children's Letters to God (New York: Perigee / Berkley Publishing Group, 1987), pp. 48, 49, 105.
[2] Deuteronomy 26:15; 2 Chronicles 6:33, 39; Isaiah 66:1; Revelation 4:2; Acts 7:49.
[3] 2 Corinthians 12:4; Colossians 1:12; 2 Peter 3:13.
[4] Sermons.com via <illustrations@CLERGY.NET> 26 October 2009.