

Fourth Sunday of Easter – Good Shepherd Sunday

Revelation 7:9-17

May 12, 2019

Throughout “series C” of our Lectionary readings, we have the joy of hearing readings from the Book of Revelation during the Easter season.

Today’s second reading from Revelation 7 speaks to us regarding this great multitude of people standing before the throne of God – people from every tribe and language, standing before God and the Lamb.

The phrase “all nations” is the same phrase Matthew uses in his 28th chapter where Jesus institutes His “great commission” to “make disciples of all nations.” And we read elsewhere that the Word of the Lord will go out to all nations, all peoples before the coming of the Lord on the final day.

And in spite of the fact that churches are struggling to keep members these days – and to be honest with you, the Church throughout the ages has always struggled with membership a whole lot more than you might think – Revelation describes a “great multitude that no one can number” from all over the world, standing before the throne and the Lamb. It’s a number that surpasses time and space. The number of those who will be saved is set, and that number WILL be reached because God is the one who does the saving of the lost – not us.

We might look at the scattered few here at St. Paul’s or in Milaca, or amongst the about 30% of people in Minnesota who even attend church, but in heaven there a multitude, an innumerable quantity of people.

Now who are these people who stand around in heaven? And what are they doing? Well, they are people dressed in white robes and holding

palm branches. Palm branches were the branches of praise and thanksgiving for the worshipers of old, so in heaven this multitude will worship and praise God for His work of salvation. And then there are elders, 24 of them, likely those of the 12 tribes of Israel and the 12 apostles – the Law and the Gospel of God, and the four living creatures and angels and they're all worshiping and praising God.

And where did they come from? They have come out of the great tribulation. And what is the great tribulation? Well I suppose we could accept the somewhat fanciful view – a view that was born sometime in the early to mid-20th century – that this is a period of 7 years just before the end of the world, but I don't think John the Revelator had any intention of suggesting this and I think we're better off letting the text speak for itself.

The fact is that things will be worse before the end of the world, and have been getting worse from day to day, for a long time. There is an entire religion out there which calls itself the "Christian Church" but isn't – it looks like the Christian Church, but it's not. It's another type; it's the church of the antichrist. It's a beast, it's huge and it's tempting to follow, but its entire message is one absent of the Gospel, absent of Christ crucified and risen. It's full of cool clichés and it works hard through teaching and preaching and worship to get you to look into yourself instead of looking to Christ. It works day and night to get you to look away from Jesus so that instead of judging the faith according to the Word of God, you judge it by how you feel about it, what you think about it, and how it benefits you. It's the same religion that the serpent spoke into Eve in the Garden and it is the worship of demons and the lies of the devil.

But this has been true since the fall. Things will get worse, but they've always been bad – for the true church of God in Christ. The unbelieving

world itself makes tribulation a reality for the church. From the extreme religions in the east beheading and killing Christians nearly every day, to our own government working hard to silence the Word of God, working to tell us what we are to believe at threat of fines or imprisonment. The Church has always suffered tribulation and tribulation always has a way of getting worse.

That multitude who stand before the throne and the lamb, they are those who have died who are no longer on the earth but whose spirits enjoy the paradise of being with Jesus in heaven before the throne where the Father sits.

They're there because they have washed their robes – their robes are white by blood. Jesus' blood is a cleansing blood, unlike our blood which stains and is difficult to remove, Jesus' blood shed on the cross cleanses the multitude and makes them pure so that they CAN stand before the throne, they CAN be in the presence of God.

And where is this throne? It is in the tent of God. The 'shelter' the Lord provides is the same shelter that the tabernacle provided the Israelites in days of old, where the blood of beasts was shed to cover their sins. The same shelter provided by the temple in Jerusalem as the sacrifices were brought and blood was poured onto the mercy seat which sat upon the ark of the covenant.

God shelters the multitude as they enter into the most holy place of heaven, the throne of God. It is a place of worship and security and safety and comfort where only the holy ones are allowed.

And who are the people with white robes, washed in the blood of the lamb, who get to stand before God and the Lamb and the 24 elders and sing with the angels and the 4 living creatures? They are you. You are the multitude! You're not waiting to be washed by the blood of the

lamb – you ARE washed! You’re not waiting for your white robes – they were given to you when the old self was drowned, and you rose to new life in Christ by baptism.

God has redeemed you so that you can forever be in His presence. You ARE born anew, or born from above, or born again.

And here’s the amazing thing to consider: When John wrote Revelation, he wrote it to seven churches in the region of what we call Asia minor. Every word in Revelation was written for their benefit, for their learning and their comfort, especially since they suffered great tribulation and the threat of death every day. John wanted to assure those churches that, in spite of what they see: the roman empire drudging around killing Christians, the false religions like Gnosticism and mysticism preaching messages similar to Christ but so very wrong, in spite of the tribulations and trials and the daily threats of death – or worse – that God was with them and they were with God. That they should stand firm, and believe, and hold fast to Christ and His cross, that He suffered for them so that even in their suffering the hope of the resurrection was secure.

And we read it the same way today. Our tribulations and suffering may look different. The temptation to abandon the orthodox, historic, apostolic teachings and practices of the faith and replace them with a modern, subjective, “what does it mean to me” sort of antichrist religion abounds as much today as it did for the seven churches. And we must fight against the temptations of the antichrist and stand firm in the mist of suffering and tribulation.

But we are covered in Christ; we are washed and made clean by His blood. Revelation, the entire text is a description of the Church of God and how we, as His multitude, His children gather before His Word and

Sacraments to receive his gifts and promises and to be protected, sheltered forever.

Jesus, born of woman. The son of man, the promised offspring of Eve, came to crush the devil. He came to be the Good Shepherd so that the wolf isn't just kept away from the sheep of His pasture, but he lays down His life; he lets the wolf devour him; He dies on the cross. But on the 3rd day Jesus destroys the wolf by bursting forth from the bowls of death and giving life and salvation to all who believe.

And we, the Church, the bride of Christ, we await the day when our Lord takes us home to the place He now prepares.

Today is Mother's Day, and while we celebrate and give thanks to God for our mothers, we also give thanks to God for Mary, the mother of our Lord – the mother of God. And we give thanks to God for His Church, the bride who exists in this world as a light in the darkness and a voice of peace and forgiveness in the chaos.

We have it NOW, folks. It's ours NOW; we experience heaven now as we sing with the angels and archangels and all the company of heaven, now. As our faithful parents and grandparents, those who have passed on before us, now sing before the throne of God – so do we! Just not in the same way, not quite yet. They see with their eyes, and we see by faith. They hear the comforting words of our Lord with their ears; we hear the same words by faith.

But we will see and hear too, when faith turns to sight and we stand with our Lord before the throne. And on the Last Day our dead and gone bodies will be raised and made into glorious bodies and our spirits reunited then, and forever we will walk the streets of Golden Jerusalem and feast at the Great Table prepared for us by Jesus.

Now we wait; now we suffer a little bit, but on the last day it will all be clear. On the Last Day all those who caused harm and suffering, who tried to lead us astray by their whimsical ways and their smooth and alluring talk, they will be taken away forever and we will live forever in the place where darkness is no more, where death is no more, and where the light of Christ shines forever. Amen.