

Date: November 10, 2024 (All Saints' Sunday, Series B)

Title: "Who Are These?"

Text: Revelation 7:2-17 (focus: vv. 13-15)

<sup>2</sup> Then I saw another angel coming up from the east, having the seal of the living God. He called out in a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to harm the land and the sea: <sup>3</sup> 'Do not harm the land or the sea or the trees until we put a seal on the foreheads of the servants of our God.' <sup>4</sup> Then I heard the number of those who were sealed: 144,000 from all the tribes of Israel.

<sup>5</sup> From the tribe of Judah 12,000 were sealed,	from the tribe of Reuben 12,000,
from the tribe of Gad 12,000,	<sup>6</sup> from the tribe of Asher 12,000,
from the tribe of Naphtali 12,000,	from the tribe of Manasseh 12,000,
<sup>7</sup> from the tribe of Simeon 12,000,	from the tribe of Levi 12,000,
from the tribe of Issachar 12,000,	<sup>8</sup> from the tribe of Zebulun 12,000,
from the tribe of Joseph 12,000,	from the tribe of Benjamin 12,000.

<sup>9</sup> After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. <sup>10</sup> And they cried out in a loud voice: 'Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.' <sup>11</sup> All the angels were standing round the throne and round the elders and the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshipped God, <sup>12</sup> saying:

'Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honour and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!'

<sup>13</sup> Then one of the elders asked me, 'These in white robes – who are they, and where did they come from?'

<sup>14</sup> I answered, 'Sir, you know.'

And he said, 'These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. <sup>15</sup> Therefore, 'they are before the throne of God and serve Him day and night in His temple; and He who sits on the throne will shelter them with His presence.

<sup>16</sup> "Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat down on them," nor any scorching heat. <sup>17</sup> For the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd; He will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

I don't know if you experienced this too, but I was delighted to see so many people I didn't know, at our 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations last weekend. Some were former members who moved away before Brenda and I came here. Others were guests from some of your families, or from other congregations. Wherever they came from, it was great to welcome them here *to gather around Our Saviour*—not just Our Saviour Lutheran Church, but also Our Saviour Jesus Christ. As our special anniversary banner shows, He is at the centre of our faith, and the deepest reason we rejoice.

That's how it is in today's first reading too. Last weekend, you and I looked back on 50 years of history, in this local area. In Revelation chapter 7, the Lord gave St. John the opportunity to look back on all of history, from the perspective of heaven.

- First, John *saw* an angel carrying "**the seal of the living God**," and gathering 4 other angels to help him "**put that seal on the foreheads of God's servants**" (to keep them safe). (2-3)
- Then John *heard* that those servants were made up of 12 equal and perfectly balanced groups "**from all the tribes of Israel**." (4) Here in the book of Revelation, "Israel" actually means "the church"—which is why John right away goes on to see this enormous crowd ("**that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people, and language**")—all of them, standing in front of God's

throne *and* in front of the Lamb (Jesus our Saviour)! (9) And what that whole big crowd was doing there was worshipping both God and the Lamb. **“They cried out in a loud voice,”** John says, **“Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!”** (10) That was such a powerful confession of faith that even the angels who heard it **“fell down... and worshipped.”** (11) **“Amen!,”** they said; **“Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honour and power and strength be to our God forever and ever. Amen!”** (12) (And you and I thought last Sunday’s worship service was pretty special!)

What I really want to pick up on though, is what happened next. One of the Elders (I’m not sure if it was Louis, or Lorne, or Gord)—one of the Elders asked John, **“These people in white robes [these worshippers, see?]-who are they, and where did they come from?”** (13) And John has no idea! The best answer he can come up with is, **“Sir, you know!”** (14) Here in our congregation, this is sometimes a bit of an issue too. I hear a lot of people saying they’re not sure who so-and-so is. Well, even there in heaven, John finds himself struggling with this very same problem. **“Who are all these people, and where did they come from?”** *John* doesn’t know!—but thankfully, this Elder does know, and helps John out by telling him who these people are, and explaining what they are doing.

Who they *are*, is, **“People who have come out of the great tribulation [by] washing their robes and making them white in the blood of the Lamb.”** (14) The great tribulation is history—specifically, the span of time *we* are now in, between our Saviour’s death and resurrection, and his glorious return at the End. Some Christians think **“the great tribulation”** refers more narrowly to a much shorter time of **“really great tribulation,”** *right before* the End. But one reason I prefer this broader understanding is because what this Elder goes on to say about these people, actually applies to us all. **“We too have washed our robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.”** (14)

That’s an odd image, isn’t it? Many of us have changed our fair share of bloody bandages, and we know very well that cloth that’s soaked in blood turns *black* (after the blood dries), not white! But that, you see, is the *miracle* that every single one of us Christians experiences, when our filthy, black, sin-stained garments come into contact with the blood that Jesus shed on the cross, for us. You would think that the grimy stain of our sin would totally pollute the dazzling white purity of his perfection. But it’s actually the opposite! The filthy blackness of our sin *disappears*, in the cleansing flood of his blood, so that our robes end up just as white and pure and holy as our Saviour’s!

And *that* is why these Christians we’re getting a glimpse of there in heaven, *do* what they do. **“Therefore,”** this Elder says—*because* Christ has washed away all their sin—**“for that very reason they are before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple!”** (15) Their identity, you see, precedes their action: *first* their Saviour makes them his own by forgiving all their sins; *then* they serve him.

And here in *this* scene (this vision God grants to St. John), they *apparently* serve God *mostly* by singing! The Book of Revelation is famous for its songs (did you know this?)—and if you pay attention to the words that we use in a lot of our liturgies, you’ll notice that many them come from Revelation. Personally, I’m never quite sure how I feel about that. I’m not so sure that “everlasting choir practice” would really be *my* first choice, for how to serve God there in heaven. I really do *like* to sing, and I *love* our Lutheran church’s 500-year-old tradition of vigorous and plenteous congregational singing. There’s nothing better on a Sunday morning than the whole body of Christ singing his praises together! But I guess I wouldn’t mind if there also turn out to be *other* opportunities to serve God *there in heaven* too, in some of the *other* ways you and I also serve him *now*: from yard-work to kitchen-work... from visiting people to praying for people... from giving of our time, to giving of our money... from labouring with our minds, to labouring with our hands.

In any case, though, the key thing here in Revelation chapter 7 is that *identity* leads to *action*... *faith* leads to *service*. Because God has *made* us his people (by forgiving our sins on account of Jesus), God also then *moves us* as his people *to* **“serve him, day and night, in his temple.”** (15)

One of the things I really enjoyed about last weekend's anniversary activities was the *diversity* of the crowd that came together around our Saviour.

- We had 3 *former* pastors (and me, the current pastor);
- we had former *members* (and current members);
- we had *friends* of the congregation; members of *other* congregations; and *family members* of most of those groups.

Well, here in this reading too, St. John recognizes a lot of diversity, in the opening part of this reading. First, we've got those 12 tribes of Israel; then we've got people "**from every nation, tribe, people, and language.**" (vv.5-8, 9) But then, interestingly enough—as we move along in this reading—all of that diversity kind of just "fades away into the background." By the time this Elder asks St. John who these people are, and where they came from, neither he nor John are paying any attention at all, to that diversity.

- In terms of *identity*, all these people haec simply become "**people who have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.**"
- In terms of what they're *doing*, they are *all* just "**serving God day and night in his temple.**"

Whether any particular one of them came from one of those symbolically-numbered "**tribes of Israel**" or from that "**great multitude no-one could count**"... whether they were busy singing soprano in the choir, or pruning the rhododendrons out in the flower-bed—none of that matters at all, from the perspective of heaven! Both their identity and their function are defined by Jesus:

- all of his saints *belong* to him (*whoever they are*),
- and so they also now *serve* him (*whatever they do*).

As this Elder assures John, with great solemnity, "**He who sits on the throne will shelter them [all] with his presence,**" and "**the Lamb at the centre of the throne will shepherd [them all].**" (15c, 17) That's what we heard in today's Gospel reading too, where Jesus applies exactly the same word ("**Blessed!**") to all the different groups he recognizes among his followers:

the poor in spirit... those who mourn... and the meek...  
those who hunger and thirst for righteousness... the merciful... and the pure in heart...  
the peacemakers... and those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness. (Matt 5:3-10)

On our level, you and I sometimes get distracted (and frustrated) by all the things that separate and divide us from each another, both in terms of who we are and in terms of what we do. But here, from the perspective of heaven, we're all exactly the same. Jesus has washed *all* of our filthy robes white in the blood he shed for us all on the cross. And therefore we *all* serve him, with all the gifts and abilities he has given us, in all the settings and circumstances of life he has placed us in.

Yes, we all have our own very different and highly personal stories, histories, identities, and gifts. We have been shaped, for good *and* for ill, by all the unique experiences we've gone through. At its best, the Church always recognizes and affirms that diversity.

At the same time though, the Church is *also* always careful, and thankful, to recognize our sameness. Who are we? Sinners, every single one of us—sinners whose robes have been washed and made white in the blood of the Lamb! And the Lord is leading *all* of us forgiven sinners *out of* this great tribulation, *into* his heavenly presence—where the service we have already *started* to render him, now in time, will *continue*, with even greater joy, forever.

And so, the song of the angels (in the middle of this reading) is our song too (each and every one of us!). "**Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honour and power and strength be to our God forever and ever. Amen!**"

*That* is the song of *all* the saints—no matter who we are! Thanks be to God! Amen!