

## Revelation 7:9-17

Our first Scripture reading for today sounds like it came out of a science fiction novel...People in white robes with palms, standing before a throne; all these coming out of great tribulation, surrounded by angels and creatures. It sounds “other-worldly.” This scene in Revelation is not one we are accustomed to seeing. Where is this place? Who are these people in white robes? Not even the Apostle John knew the answer to these questions. “*Sir, you know,*” was his reply. Were these questions to be asked of us, all we might say in response is, “It’s some place very different from this place; these are people very different from us.”

As alien as this scene in Revelation appears, it is not one, however, that is frightening to us. Just the opposite, it is soothing, comforting. It’s like a surreal painting from which we cannot look away. We are drawn to this scene, to these people. And even more, we are drawn to the words that are spoken about them: “*They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore. The sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat...and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.*”

It is clear to us that this scene in Revelation is not a place here on earth. Here we face hunger and thirst. Here we confront troubles of all kinds. Here we cry tears of sadness. This “other-worldly” place is certainly heaven. And those in white robes with palms are the saints who have endured tribulation here on earth, but now will live in peace and joy forever.

Who are these? It says that these are people “*from every nation, from all tribes, and peoples, and languages.*” We see how they are dressed. We see what they are holding in their hands. But we cannot make out their faces. Hard as we try, as we peer closely at this amazing scene, we are not able to see the faces of these blessed ones. We see no want in their expressions. We see no tears on their cheeks. We see no sadness in their eyes. But we cannot make out their faces. Their identity is hidden from our sight.

Yet, not completely. For the words about these people in white are quite revealing. We see their faces with our ears. “*They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.*” Now we know...now we see. Do you see that great multitude in white? The saints from the Old Testament are there...Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Moses, David, and Elijah. The saints from the New Testament are there...Peter, James, and John, Paul, Timothy, and Stephen. The saints throughout history are there...Augustine, Luther, Walther. These faces have names, the names of our ancestors in the Faith who trusted in Jesus and died with His name on their lips. Grandma is there, with Grandpa, not because we loved them, but because they loved Jesus. For some of us, Mom is there, and Dad. Some of us see the face of our spouse there. Some of us see the face of our brother or sister. And some, the face of our son or daughter, or grandchild.

These faces are full of joy. The tears are gone. The sickness in their body is gone. They are praising God. They are giving all glory and honor to the Lamb because He is the reason they are there. He shed His blood for them on the cross. They are in heaven because of Jesus.

Now I have a question for us. Are we there? Do we see our own face there? Are you a part of that multitude dressed in white? Am I? This scene in Revelation is not a scene in the present, but a scene in the future. At this time in the future, earth is no more. The final Judgment has taken place. All people have been separated like sheep and goats. These in white are the sheep. These are the saints, the holy ones. Anyone who is not here with this multitude in white is with the goats, separated forever from God and from the saints in glory.

Are you there? You don’t need to guess. You don’t need to wish. Let me tell you about the great temptation for us. We are sinners, you and I. When we recall the deeds of our past; when we remember our hurtful words, our lustful thoughts, we confess that we are not the holy ones. Far from living like saints, we live like the sinners we are. How can we picture ourselves with this great multitude in white! We are tempted to wonder if our face is really there with the faces of all those saints. We are tempted to doubt our place with God in heaven. This is the power of sin within us. This is why so many live in fear, and despair, and hopelessness.

But you are the baptized. Look at your baptism into Christ. You were washed. You were cleansed of your sin. In your baptism, God declares you His saint. Nothing in this scene of heaven in Revelation speaks of how these blessed ones lived. There is nothing said of their sinful thoughts, words, and deeds, nor is anything said of their good works.

*“These,”* it says, *“are the ones coming out of the great tribulation.”* They were tempted and often fell into sin. They lived with doubts and fears. They faced troubles, trials. They went through sadness. They suffered attacks for their faith. Do not worry that you, right now, do not resemble these blessed ones in white. Do not be concerned that your life does not look much like the joyful life of these saints. Now we face persecution; then we will not. Now we doubt and are tempted; then these will be removed from us. Now we sin, even though we do not want to...we sin because our flesh is weak; then all sin will be forever gone. Now we are both saints and sinners; then we will only be saints.

Friend, your face is there in that multitude dressed in white for this reason, and for this reason alone...*“They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb!”* Jesus shed His blood on the cross for you. In your baptism you were washed and made white in that blood. In the Holy Supper you are given that blood with the cup of wine. Jesus’ blood is real. It is really and truly here for you. You are saints because of that blood. Your sins are forgiven because of that blood. You have a place with that great multitude in white because of that blood.

There is no place with that multitude for those who trust in their own works of faith and love. These in white do not praise themselves. They do not honor their works, their gifts and offerings, their labors done for the church, for the Lord. These saints in white give all praise and glory to Jesus. It is through Jesus Christ alone that anyone--that we, that the saints in the Bible, that our loved ones--will be a face in that multitude in white.

And so you are a saint; a saint because of Jesus. But you and I are not with those saints yet. Those saints rest from their labors. And so let’s ask ourselves, since Jesus is the One who dresses us in white, how much of Jesus do we want? Do we want just to be acquainted with Him? Do you and I want His words of life just now and then in our ears? Do we want to read of Him, and of His love and mercy, only when we are here in church? Do we want His saving body and blood in the Sacrament just every so often?

That is not how we make certain of our salvation. That is not how the Holy Spirit works within us. That is not what faith desires. Faith wants more and more of Jesus. God’s saints confess their sins, and want more and more of His forgiveness. Those who belong to Jesus want more of Him, not less.

Today we celebrate All Saints’ Day. We, because we are God’s saints, will strive by His grace to be faithful. We, because we are God’s saints, will freely confess our sin and hear His words with joy: “You are forgiven for Jesus’ sake.” We who are God’s saints will encourage each other in the Faith.

Will we live like saints? We live like sinners. But Christ lives in you. And that’s who God sees when He looks at you. He sees the forgiven sinner that you are. He sees a saint, His saint. We do not have to wish: “Oh, I want to be in that number when the saints go marching in.” You will be in that number. You will be in that multitude dressed in white. Not because of you, but because of Him whom you trust and love, Jesus Christ your Savior. Amen.