

Revelation 7:9-17

I saw a giant billboard in St. Louis last week. It read, "The Saints are Coming." Pictured, along with these words, were a dozen or so men all wearing white clerical collars. I'm not suggesting here that the billboard is in error; that these clergymen are not, in fact, saints. My issue with it is that it promotes the commonly held idea that men in white collars are saints because they are pastors; that their vocation elevates them to the status of sainthood.

The collar around my neck is like the ring around my finger. Both declare who I am. The collar declares me to be a called and ordained minister. The ring--the husband of my wife. But the collar cannot make me a saint anymore than the ring can make me a devoted, loyal husband. You are saints before God every bit as much as I am. And we are not saints because of our vocation in life, or because of how we think, speak, or live. The question of why you are God's saints is answered by the elder who addressed the apostle John in Revelation: "*Who are these,*" he asked, "*clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?*" "Sir," John replied, "*You know.*" "*These are the ones,*" he said, "*coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.*"

John is privileged to have a glimpse of the future. He is shown a vision of God's saints, all of them, gathered before His throne in heaven. Their future is certain. Their present is one of joy. Their past is where we are today. You are the ones "*coming out of the great tribulation.*" You are they who "*have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.*"

God's saints are spoken of here in two ways: they are washed in Jesus' blood, and they endure tribulation. Tribulation does not make saints out of sinners. Jesus does. But you cannot be a saint without tribulation. It's like being a soldier. Soldiers are not made on the battlefield. They enter the field of battle because they are soldiers. But a soldier who runs away from the battle is no longer a soldier, but a deserter.

As God's saints, you are in the battle right now. Your future with Christ in heaven is certain, but now you endure trials and tribulation. The great tribulation here in our text is not one, specific, great big battle that all saints must come out of. The great tribulation is not to be capitalized here as some do with it. The great tribulation is great because it is greater than us. One soldier facing all of Hitler's army would not stand a chance. Nor do we against our enemies of sin, death, and the devil. The great tribulation is not a battle you will endure at some time in the future. The great tribulation is the battle you face each and every day because you are saints. If you were not saints of God, you would not be in the field of battle. Satan does not war against those who belong to him. He wars against the church. He battles against God's saints. He attacks those who have washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb.

You are in the battle now, and in every battle you will always find those who desert. We had deserters in the Civil War. We had deserters in WWI, WWII, Korea, and Vietnam. In the heat of battle it is always true that some will desert. And this is just as true in the church. There are saints who give up the fight. They do not necessarily denounce Christ in so many words. They just stop coming to hear Him and feed upon Him. God's saints become deserters when they stop fighting against sin, when they lay down their weapon of God's Word and Sacraments. Satan wants to make deserters of all of us. So he disguises himself and his temptations so that we do not see our enemy clearly. He tries to pull us away from the study of God's Word, away from the hearing of God's preached Word, away from the Supper where the Living Word feeds us and nourishes us.

I am not preaching to deserters today. I preach to the saints of God. Saints who are tempted to desert, yes. But saints who are kept in the Faith by One who is stronger than the devil. Check your history books, read again the pages of the Bible and you will see that it has always been this way. No saint ever remained strong in the fight because they were so strong. No saint ever endured the assaults of sin, death, and Satan because they had more character, more resolve, more determination. God's saints come out of the great tribulation for no other reason than by the mercy of God.

It is the Lamb of God who leads His saints into battle, keeps His saints safe in battle, and brings His saints out of battle into the eternal rest of heaven. You will endure, my fellow saints, day after day, because the Lamb has already battled your enemies. He shed His blood to do it, but Jesus won the battle for you against sin, death, and Satan. And so you are like a soldier walking through a great battlefield in which the enemy has been routed. You are safe because your Captain has cleared a safe path for you. As you stay close to Him, you will come through the great tribulation.

You will come through because of the blood of the Lamb, your Captain. In Holy Baptism you washed your robes in His blood. That's when God declared you to be His saint. That's when a place was reserved in heaven for you. It was God's work in baptism that makes you a saint, so let's stop looking at our works. The amount of money you put in the offering plate does not make you a saint. You are not a saint because you give. You give because you are a saint. The amount of work you do for the church does not make you a saint. You serve the Lord because you are a saint. And the amount of sin you commit day after day does not make you less of a saint. You're forgiven. That's what it means to be a saint. You are washed clean in the blood of the Lamb. This means that your sins are washed away. God does not look at your sin. He sees you as His saints because you are washed clean in Christ Jesus.

The Lamb's blood makes you God's saints, and the Lamb's blood keeps you safe in battle. That's why the blood of Christ is here on the altar for you. It is Jesus' body and blood that protects you, that keeps you from deserting His army, that leads you through the great tribulation. No saint ever made it to heaven by going their own way apart from Jesus' Word and Sacraments. But every saint, and this includes you, will be a part of that great, joyous throng gathered before the throne of God because He keeps you as His own by His words here for you, and His body and blood given and shed for you.

I've heard it said that the church is in decline, that our own congregation is declining. But friends, as we decrease, heaven increases. We are sending God's saints on to their eternal rest, one saint at a time. In the past year Dale, Clara, Glenn, and Janet have joined the saints at rest. They have come out of the great tribulation. Their joy will never come to an end. They are, even now, with Christ dressed in robes of white--the same robe you are given in your baptism. And as you come forward today to the altar of God, open your ears and listen, for they are here with Christ joining you in singing: *"Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God of Sabaoth; heaven and earth are full of Thy glory; Hosanna in the highest!"* Now we sing with them here on earth. But the day is coming when you, too, will be singing before God's throne in heaven. Stay close to Jesus. He is your Captain and He will lead you there. Amen.