

Revelation 7:9-17
Fourth Sunday of Easter
May 8, 2022

Good Shepherd Sunday brings a warm and comforting picture. "My sheep hear my voice and I know them and they follow me," Jesus stated in today's Gospel. It is good to know that we have him guiding and guarding us on our journey through life, given both our makeup as wandering sheep and the terrain through which we travel.

The scene before us in this portion of Revelation goes beyond that thought, to heaven, where we see the believers in glory. Come along with the Apostle John and see

THE LAMB SHEPHERDS US

- I. Praise him
- II. Wash in his blood
- III. Follow him to joy

As the scene opens we see a heavenly multitude praising the Lamb. "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 in front of the Lamb." The throng was too great in size for anyone to count. That shows us the population of heaven is not limited. There is room for all. Fulfilled is God's promise to Abraham that he would have as many descendants as the stars in the sky or the sand on the seashore. Believers are his true spiritual offspring and they fill this scene.

The large number reminds us that we are not the only believers, a comfort when we're feeling isolated and in a minority and also a counteraction to pride if we view ourselves as the only true believers, a select few.

The crowd came from everywhere. John named about every earthly distinction among people, whether based on race, language or custom. The diversity of the group shows us that mission work is both worthwhile and successful. God's Word gets results, just as he promised.

Let's zoom in a bit closer. We see this group of people was standing before the Lord. They were not crawling with faces buried in the dirt, shaking with fear as humans now would do before their Maker and Judge. Something is different. That is shown also by the white robes they are wearing. White is the color of purity and

holiness. That's not me, you might be thinking, and you would be absolutely correct. In heaven we will be perfect, but more on that later.

The worshipers in the scene before us are holding palm branches. It is a festive scene, celebrating victory and salvation. In John's day and area, the palm tree was regarded as the perfect tree. It could flourish for 200 years. We think of Palm Sunday and the welcome to Jerusalem that our Savior received from those who recognized him as the Messiah. Branches were also awarded to winners of athletic contests.

The celebrating crowd joined together in a message. They called out in a loud voice. It was something worth getting excited about. They wanted everybody to hear. "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb." They praised God as the author of their salvation and they praised the Lamb who obtained it. We recognize that Jesus is the Lamb of God who took away the sins of the world. His death on the cross as the sinless sacrifice paid for the sins of you and me and everyone else. That is truly something to be thankful for!

The others around the throne couldn't hear such words without joining in. They voiced agreement with the praises. Praise is contagious. It's not just diseases that are catching. So are good things like smiles and laughter, and here, glorifying our God.

"Amen," they asserted. It is absolutely true. The scene was similar to the Second Lesson from last week. The angels were there, those superhuman spirits who carry out the Lord's bidding. So were the twenty-four elders, the patriarchs and apostles, representing the Church of the Old and New Testaments. And there were the four living creatures that seem to represent all creation and God's care of it.

Events excite us in life now. We celebrate milestones in life like births, baptisms, confirmations, graduations, marriage, anniversaries, job promotions and retirements. We thrill when our favorite sports teams win the title. Religious holidays are festive. So is heaven. Joyful conditions will constantly exist. So praise will be natural. Know what? You can start practicing now. Join in worship of your Savior. Get excited about it. Put your heart into it, not just offering a mechanical repetition of familiar thoughts. Praise the Lamb who shepherds us.

II.

How can we be sure we belong in the wonderful scene? Wash in his blood and you have salvation. One of the elders addressed a question to John about the

identity of the people dressed in white. He wanted John to focus on the meaning of what he was viewing, not just marvel at the awesome scene and sound.

His words of explanation identified the individuals he saw as having come out of the great tribulation, actually, "are coming out," a continuing action. By tribulation he was referring to our earthly life. It is full of troubles. Who would deny that? Sorrow and suffering entered the human existence with sin. The previous chapter showed some of it. There was death and war and economic troubles. Bad times have been around and they are not getting any better. We only have to look around to recognize that truth. Things will get worse as the end approaches, our Savior warned.

Christians are not exempt from trouble. In fact, we must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God, the Bible informs us. We live in the same world as everybody else and endure aches and pains, misfortunes, accidents and losses. Add to it some persecution for the faith and Christians can actually have more problems than others.

The countless multitude that John saw had been brought safely out of the world with its troubles. That is the confidence which the Apostle Paul held as he neared the end of his life. "The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom," he wrote in his final epistle. The number for whom that is a delivered promise is growing daily, as saints of God end their earthly journey and join the Father in heaven.

Their robes are white because they have washed them in the blood of the Lamb. Our robes had been dirty and stained by sin. Our impure thoughts, our unkind words and our sinful actions had them covered with grime and slime. But that sin has all been forgiven in Christ, removed completely. We receive that wonderful status by faith from the cross of Christ, where he suffered the pains of hell under the justice of God, paying the penalty in full. He was our substitute. He shed that precious blood which washes us and makes us clean. He also lived the perfect life and that righteousness has been credited to us so that we appear totally clean and pure before God.

The mention of washing leads us to think of baptism, for there our sins are washed away and forgiveness is received by the individual. The sins we continue to accumulate each day are removed as we come before our Lord in repentance. Daily we renew our baptism, not repeating the action, for its blessed effects are lasting, but we come back to it, clinging to its assurance that we are God's forgiven

children whose sins have been washed away. Someone has commented, "Every day is wash day in the life of a Christian." Wash in the blood of the Lamb.

Once in awhile (and I must admit it is a great while) I wash the dishes. After some time, the water must be changed. It becomes dirtier than the dishes, especially if it has been a big family meal. Jesus' sacrifice for us was so great that his washing is still good, despite all the years that have passed and people who have used it. It is good for you and cleanses you from all your sins. Come in repentance, trust solely in Jesus and rejoice in the good news of forgiveness.

III.

Thus cleansed then follow him to joy. The experience of that joy includes serving him. The blessedness of heaven was described at the end of the text. Ten phrases were used, expressing completeness. Heaven brings the fullness of joy.

Sometimes questions are raised about what we will be doing in heaven. Is it all singing? That may bother those who don't enjoy music. We hear, "They are before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple." The term involves the use of our whole being, not just the voice. We note the service is something the people are happy to do. It's not viewed as drudgery. It is offered continually, day and night. That's because we will continually be in his presence.

Heaven also means being under his protective care. He spreads his tent over his people. God's presence overshadows his own, keeping them safe and secure. In that care he provides for his people. That's why there is no hunger or thirst. The sun won't beat on them either. Many days this spring we have wished for more sunshine, so may not see the benefit described. The sun, however, can become burning hot, scorching with its heat, such as the times you say you can fry an egg on the sidewalk. Our caring God will prevent any such distress or harm. No worry about the UV rays.

The lasting joy includes leading to springs of living water. The Old Testament used the picture of water for salvation, and John does also in his Gospel. What we receive now in the means of grace, the wonderful news of our Savior and his gift of spiritual and eternal life, we will have in endless measure.

The good news that John brings us removes even a hint of sadness. "God will wipe away every tear from their eyes." Just imagine: no sadness, whatever the cause—death, pain, disappointment, mistreatment. All of that is past. Tears of sorrow become laughter. Only happiness is experienced.

On Mother's Day we pause to treat Mom specially, something she deserves all the time but doesn't receive often enough. Moms do lots, before birth as they nurture the child in their womb, and throughout life with all the love and care they provide. Christian mothers have a special goal. They want their children to know Jesus and one day be with them in heaven, giving glory to God as this text shows. Today, give thanks if you had a mother who taught you about your Savior and his love. It is part of your Good Shepherd's care. Tell her personally if she is still with you. Follow her example of faith. Look forward to standing together before God's throne in heaven.

The purpose of this vision was to give encouragement to those who were being persecuted for their faith. We can see how they benefited from this assurance of victory. It supports us also, to know what is ahead and the victory that is ours in Christ. The experiences of this temporary existence, no matter how difficult, cannot dim the joy which lies ahead. Then live in joy and in celebration of the victory. Follow your Good Shepherd's leading in confident faith.

The scene is wonderful and it is all yours because of your shepherd. Be in him, washed by the blood he shed for you. Praise him for his goodness and follow his leading all the way to that home of happiness and joy.