

“WHO ARE THESE, ROBED IN WHITE?”

Revelation 7:9-17

Sermon by Mack Dennis, Senior Pastor

After hearing a divine announcement that there were 144,000 sealed from the tribes of Israel, marked as servants of God, John the Revelator beholds a stunning view. There before him stands a sweeping and limitless gathering of people, “from all tribes and peoples and languages.” Hearing the names of the tribes of Israel, he might have expected to see only the whole house of Israel. But in fact, what he sees are people from around the world, not only the house of Israel, but also people from every continent, people of every color and every language, and every age. The only thing they appear to have in common are their white robes and palm branches, and the words of praise they speak in unison, *Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!* John can’t describe them all. He runs out of numbers.

One of the elders addresses John with a question, “Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?” John’s answer reveals his astonishment. He replies, “Sir, you’re the one that knows,” which, translated, means, “I haven’t got the foggiest idea!” The elder tells him the answer, “These are they who’ve come out of the great ordeal; they’ve washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.” These are followers of Jesus, those who’ve suffered in Jesus’ name, those who fought the good fight. They’re the blessed ones Jesus names: the poor, the persecuted, those who mourn, the meek, the pure in heart. Who are these, robed in white? They are the beatitudes, the people called blessed, who’ve come out of the great ordeal of life, and now are gathered around the throne of God.

But while John has a view from the front row, when it comes to Revelation, we more often find ourselves in the balcony. The language and references are opaque. The symbolism seems dated. The visions too fantastic or too intimidating. Dragons, beasts with multiple heads, violence and fire and ghastly horsemen, plagues and suffering and destruction. But there are also dreams and visions, chanting and singing and prayers, golden censers emitting enchanting aromas, indescribably beautiful music, redemption, good news, new life. And we’re left wondering at the end of it all if we haven’t been through some kind of spectacular service of worship.

We shouldn’t be any more reluctant to enter the world of Revelation than we would the worlds of C. S. Lewis’s *The Chronicles of Narnia*, or J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter*, or Tolkien’s *Hobbit* or *Lord of the Rings*. Or *Star Wars*. Or (my new favorite) *Stranger Things*. All of these take their cues from Revelation, in that they assume we’re involved in an adventure full of beautiful and terrible things, a great drama, a cosmic battle between good and evil, where not only wizards and sages, the wicked and foolish, but also common people, men and women, old and young, have more than bit parts to play in the struggle. All we need to read Revelation faithfully is to read it on its own terms, and to use our God-given imaginations to really see.

So, let's do just that on this All Saints' Day. Let's come down from the balcony and sit in the front row with John, and really look to see these robed in white. Who are these? They are those who've come through the great ordeal. And what is the great ordeal? It's this. It's this life we're in, which is full of history and hope, comedy and tragedy, brimming with every human experience and emotion. Some days are so hard that to open your eyes in bed in the morning, and to know what's ahead of you, and still motivate yourself to get up can be the hardest thing you do all day. Other days are easy and simply give way, and all the lights are green. What is the great ordeal? It's this life. Full of ordinary things like khaki pants and tuna casseroles. But also extraordinary things like Brahms' *Requiem*, or Game 6 of the World Series, or the mountains ablaze with color, or a 2 lb newborn fighting for its life in intensive care.

Who are these, robed in white? They're saints. They're the blessed. We remember them in all their ordinariness, their boring days, their irritability, long days at work, paying bills, stuck in traffic, asking the grocery store clerk where to find the organic ketchup, making a peanut butter sandwich. But we also remember them in their extraordinariness, the way they could hold a room in rapt attention, how beautiful they were when they stood up for what was right, how sometimes we'd look at their face and it would be strangely illumined, and we'd wonder if there could possibly be anyone more beautiful in the whole world.

Who are these? These are the saints who've been taken from us. So our question is not only the elder's, "Who are these and where have they come from?" More often, we wonder, "Where have they gone?" We miss our saints. They showed us the way. They gave us glimpses of who God is and what God is like.

I remember what Iris said about her son, Chris, sitting with her in her living room. I was to lead a prayer vigil for their family in remembrance of Chris, who'd been shot in his front yard. I asked her to tell me about Chris, his personality, his dreams. We talked. Then she became quiet, and after a few moments said, "Sometimes I wonder where he is. Is he really just where we laid him to rest? When I'm lost in my thoughts, I wonder, does he get cold? And when it rains, does he get wet? Is he alright? I want to know, where is he?"

John the Revelator doesn't say, but I bet he was not only stunned to turn around and to see so many faces in the multitude, but to see familiar ones. Like he got lost in the crowd and suddenly found a friend and, even though he's still not sure where he's going, now has the comfort of a familiar face. Sometimes, on this side of life, God gives us such gifts. We see our saints in a dream. A vision flashes before us in broad daylight. They brush by us in a smell, a taste, an expression on a stranger's face, a picture tucked behind a picture. But now here they are in sainthood, gathered around the throne of God, and we see them in their fullness so clearly. We can see the mixed color pattern in their eyes, their freckles, how one eyelid still hangs a little lower, their broad shoulders, their elegant hands. In the eyes of your heart, do you see a familiar face, worshiping God around the throne?

Let the standing good news today be that God keeps them all. The text says, "He spreads his tabernacle over them." God "spreads his tabernacle over them," like an old heirloom quilt saved just for this moment. Who is this God? And what is this God like? On All Saints' Day, let's remember what John's vision reveals...A God who is like a mother—a mother who, upon

hearing her child cry in the middle of night, comes to comfort him, in the dark, in the cold, and who places her hand on his brow, wipes away his tears, tucks him in, and whispers, “I love you. Now go back to sleep, and all will be well in the morning.”

Who are these, robed in white? They are those who’ve come through the great ordeal. They are those whose witness sustains us through this great ordeal. And they are those who now wait along with us for that sudden burst of trumpet song, that will come, that *will* come, and will come soon. Let everyone with ears hear, and let everyone with eyes...*see*.