

April 21, 2013
Easter 4

"Safe Forever in the Arms of the Shepherd"

REVELATION 7:9-17

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 in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. ¹⁰ And they cried out in a loud voice: "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb." ¹¹ All the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, ¹² saying: "Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!" ¹³ Then one of the elders asked me, "These in white robes-- who are they, and where did they come from?" ¹⁴ 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. ¹⁵ 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 spread his tent over them. ¹⁶ Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat upon them, nor any scorching heat. ¹⁷ For the Lamb at the center 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."

Eight year old Martin Richard was cheering loudly for his father as he crossed the finish line of the Boston Marathon. Then the bomb went off that ended his life. His smiling face was gone.

A nation grieves. A nation worries. Will we ever be safe at other great sporting events? Satan has the power to lead people down the path of evil in ways that leave us stunned and shaken.

Today we celebrate Shepherd Sunday. Our focus is on Jesus our Good Shepherd. Whatever tragedies come to us as a nation or as individuals we are secure in the arms of the Shepherd in this life and for all eternity. The 23rd Psalm assures us, "Goodness and mercy follow me all the days of my life and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

The Revelation to John warns us about problems coming to Christians who are living in the last days. There will be world governments that persecute the church. It has been said that more Christians died for their faith in the 20th century than all the other centuries combine. The Revelation warns of false teachers rising up within the church who look like they belong to the Lamb of God but they speak with the mouth of the devil.

Some day it will be over. "The Lamb at the center 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."

The people

Before we look at the place our Shepherd has planned for us, let's look at the people who will be with us forever. "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 in front of the Lamb." Joining us before the throne of the Lamb is a large crowd of people that no one could count.

At times it seems that the number of people who believe in Jesus is small compared to the number of people who are living on this earth. Jesus tells us, "Many are called but few are chosen." He also said, "But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it." When you look at all the people who believe in Jesus from the time of Adam and Eve until the present, the number is huge. The Lord told Abraham he would have descendants as numerous as the stars. The Lord was speaking of all the people who believed as Abraham did in a great Descendant who would bless the whole world.

These people come from every nation, tribe, people and language. Our risen Lord has given us the command to preach the gospel to every creature. He tells us to make disciples of all nations by baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit and to teach them everything he has commanded us to teach. In some of our WELS connections we see how fellow Christians are reaching people of other countries and other cultures. Oh how we wish that our own congregation included more people of from different nations, tribes, people and languages.

As we look at all these people standing in front of the throne of the Lamb they have one thing in common. They are all wearing white robes and holding palm branches in their hands. John asks the elder who these people were who were wearing the white robes. The elder says, "These are they who have come out of great tribulation and washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb."

You and I were born with a terrible obsession that we could produce our own robe of righteousness based on the kind of life we live. How foolish it would be for a future bride to take dirty old rags from the garage and sew them together to make a wedding gown for her wedding day. The Holy Spirit convinces us that our righteousness is nothing but filthy rags in the sight of our God. The Holy Spirit directs our attention to the righteousness we have in Christ. With the Apostle Paul we say, "That I might be found in him not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ- the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith." I am holding in my hand a picture we gave to Susan's dad. It shows Jesus putting a robe of righteousness on a man who is covered with rags.

A thunderous, loud shout comes forth from this crowd. "And they cried in a loud voice: Salvation belongs to God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb." Then all the angels join in worshipping God with the words, "Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God forever and every. Amen!" That's the battle cry of your life and mine. Salvation belongs to God. Our salvation rests in God's hands and not ours. We like to comfort each other by saying, "It is in the Lord's hands," or "You are in the Lord's hands." What a grand and glorious confidence and hope is ours!

We believe that our salvation rests in the hands of God. The hands of God were nailed to a cross for your sin. Jesus even kept the nail prints in his hands as the evidence our salvation was completed by him. Your faith also belongs to God. It was given to you by your God as a free gift. Your Lord and Savior even gives you his body and blood when you receive the bread and wine in the Holy Sacrament. He gives you the blessing of baptism that puts on Christ and washes away sin. Our salvation belongs to God. As we just sang, "Living, loving, dying, rising, Jesus did it all for me."

All these white robed people with palm branches in their hands have come out of great tribulation. The Greek word for tribulation has the thought of being squeezed. We would say, "Between a rock and hard place." It is not easy to live your life for Christ. Jesus did not say, "Take up your easy chair and follow me." He said, "Take up your cross and follow me." We live each day with the struggle to be the kind of people Jesus wants us to be out of love for all he has done for us. We find ourselves praying for people to come to know Jesus or not give up the precious faith they have in him. The violin needs to have its strings tightened to play beautiful music. The Christian is stretched by Jesus to give glory to him for all his blessings.

We have seen the people. Now let's look at the place our loving Lord and Shepherd has prepared for us. The humorist Mark Twain once sarcastically quipped that we will suffer in heaven by having to sing one hymn over and over again. How far off this is from the truths about heaven presented to us in this great text of Scripture.

The place

"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 spread his tent over them." We get to be before the throne of God. We get to see him in his temple in all of his glory. He spreads his tent over us. Some of the happiest moments in life for us are those we spend with people we love who also love us. All the greatest moments of life put together and distilled down into pure joy cannot equal being with the Lord in the place he has prepared for us. 1 Thessalonians tells us when Jesus returns to raise us to life again we will be with the Lord forever. 1 John 3 says we will see our Lord face to face. To be in God's tent is to experience his gracious hospitality forever and ever.

"Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat upon them, nor any scorching heat." Think of God's people traveling in the desert to the Promised Land. The sun beat on them. They were thirsty. They were hungry. In heaven all of your needs will be taken care. You will never have to ask yourself, "What am I going to do about this? How will I pay for the repairs on my car? How will I get along with people on my job?" All the discomforts and unpleasant things of this life will be removed forever. There will be no more hospitals, pharmacies, nursing homes and visits to the doctor.

What will heaven be like? "For the Lamb at the center 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." Jesus, the Lamb of God who took away the sin of the world will be our Shepherd. The careful shepherd knows where the mountain meadows are lush with grass. He knows where the water is fresh and the large trees are for shade. When the summer heats up

and the grass withers and the streams dry up, the shepherd gently takes his sheep up to the mountain heights. He knows where the rich grasses are. He knows where the streams come out of the mountains cold and refreshing. So the Shepherd plans to raise you to life on the last day and give you a glorified body as he has determined. He will take you to the place he has already prepared for you. He says, "I know my sheep and my sheep know me." He knows what is best for you.

C. S. Lewis writes in the *Tales of Narnia* "All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page; now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story, which no one on earth has read, which goes on forever, in which every chapter is better than before." Every chapter is better than before in the place your Shepherd has planned for you. "When we've been there ten thousand years, Bright shining as they sun. We've no less days to sing God's praise, then when we first begun."

No more tears in heaven. No more worry about terrorists and security. No more broken homes. No more death. There will be no Kleenex in heaven. God will wipe away every tear from their eyes. As we sing in the spiritual, "No more crying there, we are going to see the Lord." Even so Lord Jesus come quickly. Amen.