

THE SONG OF THE REDEEMED

Rev. 7:9-17

October 7, 2018

Let's talk about the saints. Most often, when we think of saints, we think of people whom the Catholic Church has deemed as saints, or perhaps, we think of the people like the Apostles' or St. Paul, Martin Luther, or Dietrich Bonhoeffer, or Oscar Romero. We might think of Mother Teresa of Calcutta, or maybe even of the young girl from Columbine High school who is reported to have declared her faith, and then was killed for it. Maybe we would include a grandmother, or grandfather, or a Sunday school teacher.

But, in the Bible, a saint isn't an individual singled out who did extraordinary things, and was thereby given a special honor. Sixty-nine times the word "saints" is used in the Bible; but it is never used to designate any particular person. The word is always used in the plural sense to describe all of those, living and dead, who belong to Christ. Saints are the saved sinners, the holy ones who have been redeemed by God. And in today's scripture, John shares with us from his vision a glimpse of what the life of saints in heaven is like.

These are the redeemed, who—as it says in v. 14—have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. That is, they have been saved, their sins have been washed clean by the blood of our Lord, the great sacrifice for our sins. They are recipients of the New Covenant in the blood and body and life of Christ Jesus. An Elder tells John that these have come out of the great ordeal. Now, I'm not going to get into the end-of-time sequence of tribulation and rapture and Kingdom, because I'm confused by it, because Revelation contradicts itself about all that...which may be why I'm confused. Suffice it to say that these are now in heaven, beyond all despair, ordeal or tribulation.

Heaven is indescribable, but authors have tried, as does John in this book. The most, the best, we can do is to create images of beauty and power and joy.

Heaven has been described as paved with gold, full of light and beauty, and that as I've said, it defies earthly imagination. But metaphors abound, like the marvel of many colored jewels, jewels of infinite value. These are the images of fruit and fullness, of lush greenery (think of the vision this would capture for those of a barren, dry land like Palestine.) It's all about abundance – the abundance of being present with the very God.

Abundance: At v. 4 it says, "And I heard the number of those who were sealed, one hundred forty-four thousand, sealed out of every tribe of the people of Israel." Let's take that apart some. The 144,000 is a metaphor of all the abundance of God. "Of every tribe of the people of Israel" it says. As in the God's Chosen People, the gathered, those gathered by God, into God's heaven. And you and I, Christians, are part of that, because by Christ, we've been gathered into the House of Israel, too, right?

144,000. Those Jehovah's Witnesses who come to your door? They really believe it's only 144,000 who ever make it to heaven, and if you press them about it, their faces fall. They know that by now, after all this time, they're not in the 144,000.

However, 144,000 is a very special number. A perfect number, if you will. The perfect number 12, times the perfect number twelve, times a thousand (a numerical symbol for lots and lots, and unaccountable lots.) This 144,000 is God's perfect, unimaginably great, wider-than-wide, higher-than-high number ... all the people from all time, whom God invites in His awesome generosity into God's Heaven.

Verse 9, where we started, says, "After this looked (as in, I looked closer) and there was a great multitude that no one could count (no longer just 144,000 individuals by count, right?) a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white with palm branches in their hands." Wow, I love that.

Envision a crowd, a sea of people, uncountable, from every walk of life, every culture, every nation. It's a reminder that there is plenty of room for all the in the kingdom of God. And there they were, as it says, "standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands."

There they are, face to face with, in the very presence of their beloved and be-loving God. Wearing white robes. The word for robes here is "stolas"—which were long robes, fancy robes for leisure, not labor....And white, meaning purity and complete righteousness. Purity and righteousness—not because of our perfection, but because of the Blood of the Lamb. Being washed by the blood of the Lamb, they are not free from fear, free from guilt, free to praise and rejoice forever in the presence of the very God.

See, they were carrying palms. Palms were emblems of conquerors, signals of victory. They signified victory over the world, victory over the flesh, even victory over the devil himself. The war has already been won. The victory is Christ's. And that's a fact.

So because palms were signs of conquerors, emblems of victory, that means they are signs, further, of thanksgiving and celebration, huh? Christ has conquered; Christ has won our victory. Let's celebrate with all our joy. There is joy in the house. We have been set free!

Marveling over the message of salvation through Jesus Christ, this multitude in what are now white robes, cried out, in a loud voice, shouting, "Salvation belongs to our God, who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!"

Worshipping God—falling on their faces in profound and utter humility. There is nothing of *them*, but all of *God* now. They give themselves fully, profoundly, joyfully to their God because God has seen them through the great tribulation (NRSV: the great ordeal.) Now, as I've hinted, this may be the great and terrible cataclysm that happens at the end of time, but it could be your

ordeal. Ordeals of various kinds beset human beings. But now in God's heaven there is no more weeping, nor hunger, nor thirst; free from all difficulties, all needs, wants and fears. God provides their all in all. Because God is guiding them, there is no more guessing at God's will either. They know it. It has been written on their hearts now, no longer on tablets of stone. They now know the awesomeness of being really *with*, praising God with all that they are.

We here still on earth, are still bound by flesh and matter and stuff that gets in the way, but these saints are free for concentrated joy. They sing, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen!"

The multitude of the saved, this world-wide, no, this creation-wide gathered group of saints, from every nation and every tribe and every language sang this hymn of praise in perfect harmony between the angels and the saints...without ceasing. Day and night.

When I was in seminary, I attended a pre-breakfast prayer meeting. We'd speak of our blessings and the scriptures we were pondering, and our desires before God, and then we'd be in prayer silently. But there was one woman who couldn't be silent. Under her breath she would joyfully praise, as if it caught up her whole being, "Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might," over and over again ... til it filled our souls, too. That's one of the beloved memories of my seminary experience. Full of praise. Full of the Word of God. Full of God-given joy.

Blessing
and glory
and wisdom
and thanksgiving
and honor
and power
and might

Seven honors. Seven things. Seven, the perfect number, to recognize and honor and connect with God's perfection.

See, heaven is a state of wonder, and, now fully-embracing the God of our eternal lives. It's a place of rest, yes, but not a place of sloth. It's a place where, now free from stuff and matter and ordeal, we can enjoy our God forever.

Some of you remember the first question of the Westminster Catechism: What is the purpose of man? (A): The purpose of man is to worship God and enjoy Him forever. So this passage is a vision of God and humans in the perfect relationship. But you know, it's our promise, too! You and I can have great joyous expectation. These saints, this multitude, this congregation of the saved as large as God's own imagination—of every tribe and nation, are cheering you and me on from the heavens, saying "Live your life. It will be worth it. Hang in there."

And in your joy, and in your expectation, join with all the others here and there and over there, from every tribe and every people and every language, and sing the song of the redeemed:

Blessing and glory, and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God, forever and ever! Amen.

Amen.