

Fourth Sunday of Easter

Text: Revelation 7:9-17

Title: “Who are these, clothed in white robes?”

Vicar Michael Larson

4/25/2010

“I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with Palm Branches in their hands...They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore they are before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple” (Revelation 7:9, 14-15).

Often times when we think of the book of Revelation, we think of wild visions of dragons and seven headed beasts. We may think of blasting trumpets and the four horsemen of the apocalypse riding furiously straight toward us. I have been a part of many bible study groups that sat down to figure out the book of revelation only to give up prematurely, without a clue what to make of it.

When I was young, I was fascinated by the terrifying images in the book of Revelation. I wanted to know more and therefore decided to ask my Sunday school teacher about the book. She was an elderly pious woman named Marla, who had been in the congregation her whole life. She was the sort of church lady who organized the prayer chains. The sort who would come into church just to clean the windows or mop the floor in the kitchen.

I asked, “Marla. Can you tell me what is going on in the book of Revelation? There is some scary stuff here!...There are dragons and seven headed beasts. There is a lake of fire and all kinds of war. There are horsemen and loud trumpets and plagues. Marla, Satan is also in there doing all kinds of stuff.” Marla bent down and looked at me, as if she had heard this kind of fascination a hundred times before, by a hundred different young boys.

She said, “All you need to know for now Michael is that Jesus wins.” I don’t know if it was the answer I was looking for at the time. I was probably hoping to crack the Da Vinci Code or something along those lines. I was probably looking for some secret knowledge, so that I could impress my buddies at school.

I may have walked away a little disappointed but little did I know her words would comfort me for a lifetime. Marla, my pious Sunday school teacher preached to me a different sort of knowledge. The knowledge of the Gospel. Jesus Christ wins.

John's revelation is not to frighten us, but is read here to comfort us. In today's Revelation reading we have an exceptionally comforting text as John looks upon heaven itself:

“I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with Palm branches in their hands.”

I can't think of a more fitting image for us, here gathered at St. Paul Lutheran church. Though John the Apostle is speaking of heaven, he also describes our activity here on earth – or as we pray in the Lord's Prayer “On earth as it is in heaven.” **We are the great multitude, from every nation, from every tribe and every language.** We have members from nearly every corner of the earth. We are gathered because Jesus wins. He has washed us in holy baptism and has dressed us in the white robe of righteousness. We have been cleansed by the blood of the Lamb, given here at this altar.

Since 1892 the people of St. Paul Lutheran Church in Melrose Park have gathered around the risen Christ – standing before the throne and before the Lamb of God. We have been confessing the same thing - that Jesus has won, and that he is the beginning and ending of our story.

Though the great victory has been won, our course here at St. Paul is not yet complete. In John's revelation **We are the ones coming out of the great tribulation.** We are the ones preparing to enter the heavenly vision through the washing of Holy Baptism, and daily forgiveness in the blood of the Lamb. The tribulation of our sin, tribulation of war and poverty, the tribulation of injustice. The tribulation of death and decay. All these tribulations too will pass.

But for now, on earth, we worship the Lamb by serving each other. At St Paul Lutheran Church and School we are part of this tradition. St. John describes our work in His revelation: **“Therefore they are before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple.”**

Our place of worship here is the temple of our neighbor, where we joyfully offer our sacrifice and love. We have blessed ladies that serve children in India by

making quilts. We have youth at St. Paul that worship God by feeding the homeless at a nearby shelter. We have a choir and church musicians and joyfully serve in our worship here. We do all these things because Jesus wins. We have members here at St. Paul who come out in a great multitude on a Saturday to meticulously clean the sanctuary and choir loft – just for fun!

In this Revelation vision today an elder asks John, **“Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?”** John says to Him, **“Sir, you know who they are.”**

Dear members of St. Paul Lutheran Church and School. You know the heavenly beings dressed in white robes worshiping before the throne of God. These saints arrayed in white are not nameless people. They are your people. They are the people of God. They sit next to you in your pew. You know them. You speak with them in the fellowship hall with coffee and danish in your hands.

Who are these, clothed in white and where have they come from? They are the ones you know. They are your departed mother and father. They are your friends and your family. They are those who have died and passed over to the church triumphant. They are the ones washed in holy baptism and who drink from the same communion chalice as you. They are the forgiven ones, like you, who have Christ as their righteousness.

As we await the culmination of John’s vision of heaven, we already have a foretaste of all that which is coming. As Marla my Sunday School teacher said, “All you need to know now about Revelation is that Jesus wins.” And I might add that he wins for you! And he wins through you! In the name of Jesus.