

**St. Andrew's Anglican Church, Douglas GA**

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ Rector

Scripture: Revelation 7: 9-17

***"The Saints of God"***

Every once in a while, I like to ask you a personal question: Have you ever had a vision of something? It could be a flash of a future event and the way you hope it will be, or it could be just a relaxing thought of a vacation or special time in your life that has already happened, and that vision could very well have been in a dream. What is happening in today's reading from the Revelation of Jesus Christ to John is part of John's continuing vision; and it's a vision that is not of nice dreams in his head.

The reality is that Almighty God and the Lamb have already won the victory, the victory which means that those who follow the Lamb are rescued from harm. The reality is that the people who claim the lamb's protection may well have to come through a time of great suffering, usually referred to as the tribulation, but they will then find themselves in the true reality, in God's throne room, worshipping and serving Him day and night with great, abundant and exuberant joy. This vision is what John 'sees' in verse 9 of chapter 7, after having 'heard' the list of the 144,000 in verses 4–8. He sees a huge throng of people which nobody could ever count – so don't get hung up on numbers. It is more than you ever could count – and it keeps growing! This huge throng of people – and then John also saw the four living creatures, the elders and the angels. His description of the throne in the center and the growing circle of those who were praising God - is absolutely awesome. I want to encourage you to read again this passage from Revelation 7. John says that all the saints are from all the corners on the earth—from every tribe and nation and language. In Scripture – the word 'nation' refers to the Gentiles. This is people of the earth. The group that is worshipping the Lamb is expanding; no one could possibly count them – almost beyond imagination. There are no ushers at the door with 'clickers' counting people as they come in. John's description is very clear; they were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands.

- White robes: the sign of purity, a sign of Christ's righteousness and holiness.
- The palm branches: a sign of victory and royalty – of the King of Kings – recalling His triumphant entry into the earthly Jerusalem on the Sunday before He was crucified.

The word '*salvation*' in verse 10 literally means 'to be saved or rescued.' Christ's death on the cross 'rescues' us from ourselves, from our own sins. This shout of praise continues into verse 12, where the great crowd of the redeemed recognize with joy that everything good, noble, powerful and wise can only come from God Himself. It is the uninhibited shout of praise to God from whom all blessings flow.

John, during this vision, is in the heavenly throne room, and reading a little further we see that this is not just any throne room, but this is the Temple. God's Holy Temple, the heavenly temple, the perfect counterpart to the Temple in Jerusalem. I find it absolutely amazing that John is not simply looking on from a great distance as a fly-on-the-wall, but he is right in there, with the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders. And one of those elders speaks to John, asking him the questions which we all want to know the answer to – "*who are these people?*" "*Where do they come from?*" This elder himself supplies the answer – "*These are they*

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*who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.*" (Revelation 7:14) This is the answer that the church badly needs to hear. The church in John's time and the church in our time. These are those who have come out of the great suffering. They have lived through the nightmare and can now wake up to a glorious, fresh new morning. The reason their clothes are white is not because they necessarily lived lives of total holiness and purity, but because of one thing; the blood of the Lamb of God, the sacrificial Passover-like death of Jesus Himself, who has rescued them from slavery to sin, making them able at once to stand in the very presence of the living God, Himself. If you have sin you cannot be in God's presence; darkness cannot exist in light. It is not our righteousness that God sees when we believe in Jesus and we ask Him to be our Lord; it is the righteousness of Christ Himself, through the sacrifice on the cross – through His Blood.

Because of the death of Jesus, and the suffering that they have already endured in His Name, God will allow them, and in fact welcome them into His glorious presence in His temple, and then *"He who sits on the throne will spread his tent over them"* (Revelation 7:15) just as He pitched His tent – His 'tabernacle' in the midst of the Israelites during their wilderness wanderings in the Book of Exodus. All the blessings of the Jerusalem Temple, in other words, will be theirs. In ancient times it was a part of hospitality for a person to be invited in and the host would extend their tabernacle – their tent over you. That meant you were family. The image of this is that God is extending His tent and saying you are not just saints – but you are my family!

When you and I look in the rear-view mirror of our lives we not only see God's fingerprints on everything, but we also see the effects of our sin, which are downright devastating. No one on this earth can ever escape them. Even though people might try to deny sin and might try to cover up some sins and hide them or explain them away, **sin is still sin**. Sin infects us all by virtue of being born into this fallen world. None of us can escape death; none of us can escape sin. God speaks through the Prophet Ezekiel, the prophet, who writes: *"Behold, all souls are Mine; the soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is Mine. The soul who sins will die."* (Ezekiel 18:4)

Just as no one has escaped death, so no one escapes sin. Believers in Jesus are thankful because by God's divine forgiveness - our sins, when we repent, are forgiven. They are washed away, covered by the 'Blood of the Lamb!' I don't know about you – but for me that is good news! That lifts me up because no matter what I do, or no matter what I say, or the horrible things I might think – when I ask for God's forgiveness – it comes pouring out like Jesus' Blood. The blackness of our tarnished heart is covered by the blood of Jesus Christ so that we, like the saints who are standing before the throne of God, will one day also stand there with robes of righteousness. Not our righteousness, but HIS righteousness!

Salvation comes from the Lamb;

- the Lamb who is our shepherd;
- who provides us with divine forgiveness

- And provides us with eternal life.

Looking at Revelation and seeing the visions of John, sometimes they are almost beyond human comprehension. Time and again we find the same people gathered there, the angels, the saints—singing out, “*Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.*” *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, saying: “Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!”* (Revelation 7:10-12)

The angels, the saints – they are there day and night – worshipping Almighty God. How awesome is that? Sign me up! Nothing to worry about, nothing to fear, nothing to do except praise God; they don’t get tired, so they can do it day and night - forever and ever.

John continues with his description: “*Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat upon them, nor any scorching heat. 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.*” (Revelation 7:16-17) Can you imagine not being hungry? Not being thirsty?

John makes a wonderful connection for us — that this Lamb is not just the ‘*Lamb of God*’ but He’s also the Good Shepherd. Jesus is not just the sacrificial Lamb, but He is the One who leads us to eternal life and to springs of the water of life – living water! Do you remember the Samaritan woman who came and sat at the well with Jesus? He talked to her about the water of life. At the end of the conversation with this woman – Jesus says, “*whoever drinks of the water that I will give him shall never thirst; but the water that I will give him will become in him a well of water springing up to eternal life.*” (John 4:14)

As believers of Jesus Christ as the Son of God – as the Lamb of God - we know that heaven is our home. We are confident that no matter what happens in this life; no matter how much or how little we might have to suffer or how much or how little tribulation we go through, that God has blessed us with an eternal inheritance. The Kingdom of heaven is meant for you and me, for believers from every nation. In the beginning of chapter seven, it talks about the twelve thousand from the different tribes. John declares the saints are innumerable! They are from every nation and tribe. It is true-you and I are not Jews by birth. Does that mean that you and I do not have salvation? Certainly not! You and I are Jews by faith. We are the children, the sons and daughters of Abraham – grafted in to the root of Jesse – David’s father. (Romans 11:17) The Lord tells us that. The Lord reminds us that we are saved by God’s grace, not by birth.

In closing, I want to share with you the message that the Apostle Peter wrote in his first letter, during a time of great persecution for the church. This letter is full of encouragement, reminding us that no matter what you face and no matter what you lose on this earth - you still have God’s salvation, God’s rescue. He encourages when he writes, “*In this you greatly rejoice,*

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*though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith--of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire--may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls.” (1 Peter 1:6-9)*

My brothers and sisters in Christ – WE do indeed have reason to rejoice today, give thanks and sing - for we, as believers, are the saints of God!