

## Revelation 7:9-17

4 Easter C Midweek + May 15, 2019  
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho  
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Who Are These?

The Word of the Lord from Revelation 7: "Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?" This is the Word of the Lord.

Dear hearers in Christ, He is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Who are these, clothed in white robes?

They're beyond number. They're from all nations – the same words that Jesus used when He said to His disciples, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19). They are from all tribes and peoples and languages, because the Lord declared that His Word would go forth to all the world, and He is extravagant with grace.

It's not a small number. It's a great multitude. The Church always seems to look like the scattered few near extinction in this world, but God will have His people – too numerous to count!

They are standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They are clothed with white robes and they are holding palm branches in their hands. Waving palm branches only pops up twice in Scripture. On Palm Sunday, the people waved palm branches as Jesus entered Jerusalem. They were shouting, "Hosanna" – "save us now!", and "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord." In a few short days, He would be raised up on a cross as He died for the sins of the world. Now in Revelation 7, while the palm branches are the same, everything is different – it's fulfilled! Instead of the cross, there's a royal throne. Instead of the Savior preparing to sacrifice, He is now present as the resurrected Lamb who has been slain. Rather than throwing down their garments in service to Him, they are wearing white robes that He has given to them. And instead of crying out, "Save us now!," they declare that He *has*: "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" It's done. The victory is the Lord's.

Who are these? They stand with angels around the throne, and with the twenty-four elders. They stand with the four living creatures. This rather elite choir continues the song that you heard last week in Revelation 5: "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen." All of this belongs to Him. Amen. Let it be so.

Who are these? One of the elders asks John, "Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?" When John punts, the elder explains, "These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. 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; and He who sits on the throne will shelter them with His presence."

So, they've come out of the great tribulation. That's not some seven-year period in the future when things get really bad. Life in this world is always a time of great tribulation for the people of God, ever since Adam and Eve fell into sin. But this multitude in heaven is delivered. We feebly struggle, they in glory shine.

*Why* are they there? Because they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Blood and white robes don't normally go together – in fact, bloodstains are often the worst to

remove. In this case, though, the Blood of the Lamb has removed every stain and spot of sin from their robes. They are holy before God, because Christ has paid for every last one of their sins.

*Where* are they? They are “before the throne of God,” with Him “who sits on the throne” and “who will shelter them with His presence.” The word for “shelter” there is an important one: it’s also the word for tent or tabernacle. Back in the Old Testament, the tabernacle was God’s temple in the wilderness as the people of Israel journeyed to the Promised Land. God dwelt with His people in the Holy of Holies, concealed in that inner room of the tent because sinners couldn’t look upon His glory. Now, in Revelation 7, He shelters them with His presence. In other words, they’re inside the Most Holy Place with Him. That’s eternal life – life in the glorious presence of God forever. They can be in His presence because the Lamb has made them clean with His own blood, because He became flesh and tented among them in order to save them from sin.

They are in the presence of God because they’re holy, and only holy things can be in God’s presence. That explains what’s not in the vision: hunger, thirst, scorching heat, or sadness. And because all the curse of sin is gone, “God will wipe every tear from their eyes.”

So who are these, gathered around God’s throne with the elders and the living creatures? Who has the honor of being that close in white robes, waving palm branches and singing praises to the Lamb? Who are these, delivered from the great tribulation, never to suffer sin, pain or affliction again?

Who are these? Along with the rest of God’s people, they are you.

You are among those whom God has gathered in from all nations. You are cleansed with the blood of Christ, and you wear the white robe of His righteousness, because all who are baptized into Christ have put on Christ. This is what Christ has redeemed you for.

For those who would cling to sin, reject Christ’s grace and have no desire to be in the presence of God, an alternative would be an eternity in a place where God is not, or at least not present with grace and mercy. That would be hell. But hell is not for you. You’ve been washed clean by the blood of the Lamb. Your future – your eternity – is life in His presence, with every good thing. That is what God offers to all people through His Son Jesus Christ, so that all who believe in Him might be saved from hell and delivered to heaven.

For now, you’re neither in heaven nor hell. You’re in this world, sort of in between. There’s a bit of hell here, because you still witness the wages of sin with the sickness, the troubles, the anxiety and everything else that contributes to great tribulation. But this world is not hell, because God is still present in this world. There’s a bit of heaven here, too, for precisely that reason: God is present with you, as near as His means of grace. He’s clothed you in that white robe of righteousness in your baptism, He keeps speaking you clean with His absolution, and He gives you a foretaste of the feast to come in His Supper. But this world is not heaven, either: God is present, but God must still conceal Himself in words and water, bread and wine. He must do so because sinners can’t abide His glorious presence and live. So for now, you’re between heaven and hell, enduring in a world that features both hellish tribulation and heavenly grace.

The point of Revelation 7 is to remind you of your future. This world is not the end or your final destination. Your place in that multitude around God’s throne is already secure because the Lamb has already shed His blood for you and forgiven you for all of your sins. The only ploy the devil has left for you is to get you to run away from God’s gifts of forgiveness and heaven, and to choose sin – and eventually hell – instead. He’ll try to make sin look attractive, and your sinful flesh will want to cooperate and choose the sin over grace and the Promised Land. He’ll work to distract pastors away from the proclamation of repentance and forgiveness, to some other message for some other reason. He’ll try to make you doubt God’s presence and believe you’re God-forsaken and already in hell. He will magnify

your afflictions to make God look feeble or distant. That is why this text is such a comfort: written to Christians who are being ground into a fine powder by tribulation, it is also written to you.

The tribulation you face is great. But Christ is greater, and here's the proof: all of the trouble you face is a result of sin and designed to lead you to death. But Christ has already conquered death. He's emerged from the tomb, never to die again; and if He's conquered the greater enemy – death itself, He is certainly greater than the tribulation that afflicts you.

So once again, by the grace of God, hold fast in Him. This time of tribulation will cease, because the enemy is already defeated. Everything that has power to separate you from God has been gutted at the cross. Eternal life in His glorious presence is already yours, where there will be no hunger, thirst, scorching heat or any other suffering anymore. Those things can't be there, because they are the result of sin. You will be there, because Christ has taken away your sins. For His sake, God will wipe away every tear from your eyes.

You don't see it yet. You see trouble. In the words of the hymn:

Though with a scornful wonder, men see her sore oppressed  
By schism rent asunder, by heresy distressed.  
Yet saints their watch are keeping: their cry goes up, "How long?"  
And soon the night of weeping shall be the morn of song.

Those saints who cry "How long?" are in heaven, their souls under the altar in Revelation 6. But that is your prayer, too, and certainly a good one. We pray that the Lord would come quickly and deliver us from tribulation. But however long the Lord tarries in His wisdom and mercy, you have the vision of Revelation 7. You know the end of the story: eternal life, because your robes are washed white in the blood of the Lamb.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen