

A Time to Worship; Revelation 7: 9-17; Epiphany 6C
Second Presbyterian Church
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Scripture: Revelation 7:9-17

9 After this I looked, and there was 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, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. ¹⁰They cried out in a loud voice, saying,

‘Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!’

¹¹And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshipped God, ¹²singing,

‘Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom
 and thanksgiving and honour
 and power and might
 be to our God for ever and ever! Amen.’

13 Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, ‘Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?’ ¹⁴I said to him, ‘Sir, you are the one that knows.’ Then he said to me, ‘These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

¹⁵ For this reason they are before the throne of God,
 and worship him day and night within his temple,
 and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them.

¹⁶ They will hunger no more, and thirst no more;
 the sun will not strike them,
 nor any scorching heat;

¹⁷ for the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd,
 and he will guide them to springs of the water of life,
 and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.’

Sermon:

In today’s reading John asks a rhetorical question. One of the elders asks John, the author of Revelation, *Who are these people, robed in white, and where have they come from?* (v 13).

A rhetorical question is not necessarily a question to be answered but a means of emphasis or a way to insert drama into the narrative by a writer or speaker. But, there’s another possible reason for a rhetorical question. It could be a statement of an incredulous nature. For example, *how the heck did this happen?*,

either said in a positive or negative nature. In other words, WOW! This “WOW” factor is what I believe we have in Revelation 7.

Our author John is detailing a vision in Revelation that he has. We have to be careful how we interpret this vision. Revelation has often been interpreted as a linear string of events that will happen before the end of time. The evil people, personified by The Beast, will be defeated before God’s Kingdom is established. Because the vision is violent, the violence is almost always imagined to be against those who appear to be enemies.

Scholars point out that to interpret the book this way is dangerous and has been proven incorrect as to the date of the end of time over and over and over again. Scot McKnight, a leading scholar on the book of Revelation, points out that every generation creates at least one myth relating to the symbols from Revelation and how they detail the date of the end of the world. A date which never comes to pass.¹ Instead, Prof. McKnight urges us to use the book as a metaphor for good versus evil and the triumphant nature of God’s eternal kingdom.² It is the Biblical version, if you will, of Star Wars, Harry Potter, and The Lord of the Rings, to name only a few. And isn’t hope what this narrative of good conquers evil gives us?

In Revelation chapter 7, we have a pause in the battle of good versus evil. The Lamb has opened 6 of the 7 seals on the scroll and will return to open the 7th seal in chapter 8. In the beginning of chapter 7, the angels hold the winds back and we see 144,000 people, 12,000 from each tribe of Israel. 12 tribes. 12 thousand from each tribe. Twelve, a whole and perfect number in Biblical numerology. Then, in the portion Baird read, a great multitude that no one can count from every nation, tribe, people, and language stands before the throne worshipping God.

Now close your eyes and put yourself in that room. An infinite number of souls no one could count standing before God, robed in white, and praising God. All these souls are to be marked as God’s own before the battle resumes in chapter 8. This is the point in which the elder asks the rhetorical question or states WOW, where did all these people come from and who are they??!! (v 13)

It turns out all these people *have come out of the great ordeal*. (v 14)

Now who doesn’t feel like you are struggling through the great ordeal? Don’t answer...it’s a rhetorical question! And if we who have so much privilege feel this way, can you imagine how those who feel as if they are running for their lives from this great ordeal feel? Another rhetorical question.

These are the people we can’t count, who are standing before the throne of God, who have come through the great ordeal, who are praising God. They are worshipping God.

¹ The New Evangelicals podcast, “The Shocking Truth about Revelation,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hvnqh3r6fgY> accessed 2/10/25.

² Ibid.

This picture is the redemption for which we all seek. These are the people who will hunger and thirst no more...the Lamb...will be their shepherd, and God will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes (vs 16-17). Friends, this is the promise God gives.

But, note the verb. God will. Future tense. God will be their shepherd. God will guide them. God will wipe away every tear from their eyes. God will, but they are already worshipping God. It is the promise, not necessarily their current reality. It is the promise they anticipate.

Like them, we anticipate this promise. We hold fast to God's promise to those who have been through the great ordeal.

We, like those clothed in white, don't wait for God's promise to be realized. We praise God for what God will do, what God has promised to do.

Revelation helps us to see that praising God is right to do, not just because God has saved us, but because God is going to save us. In fact, God is saving us through our worship and praise and our work. We enable God's promise, both for ourselves and others, by praising God and for working toward the reality of God's kingdom where God is leading us out of our ordeals to springs of the water of life.

Which takes me to this moment. As Christians, we don't wait for God's kingdom to be fulfilled in the fullness of time, we praise God now, we worship God now, and we work for God's kingdom now. Today we ordain and install Diana, Annette, Jesse, David, Laura, Brian, and John to lead us in this process of working for God's world. They have been elected by this congregation and called by God to help us walk through the great ordeal toward the time when God will wipe away every tear from our eyes (v 17). Their service to God's church and God's people is not just some happenstance or luck of the draw. No. They have been called by a sovereign God to worship and work with us toward the promise of God's reign. And it's not just them.

We have all been called by God to worship God and the Lamb.

Back to our rhetorical question: who are these people, robed in white, and where have they come from?

They and we, and countless others, have been called by God to receive God's promise where God will guide us to springs of the water of life and God will wipe away every tear from our eyes.

This is the promise seen in the vision by John. A promise for which we have a part to play.

Why is the book of Revelation in the Bible? Maybe we need this promise. Maybe we need to be reminded that we are surrounded by others who have been through the great ordeal, to be reminded of God's commitment to us. Reminded that we have a part to play in the hope of God's redemption in which we all share.

Thanks be to God! Amen.