

THE LAMB IS THE SHEPHERD

Revelation 7:9-17

Fourth Sunday of Easter (Series C)

May 12, 2019

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

I generally resist the notion that the greeting card companies, or the state, or the world around us should dictate the content of Sunday morning. I'd rather follow the Church's calendar than the secular calendar. So I generally don't say much about secular holidays during the sermon. However, when the world decides to honor the divine institution of family and the God-given vocation of motherhood, well, that's something we can appreciate. Scripture commands us to honor our parents. So I had intentions all week of including something in the sermon about motherhood, but I couldn't really find an organic way to fit it into this text, so let me say something about it before we get to the text.

Everyone has a mom. This is the way God designed the world to be. Without your mom, you wouldn't even exist. She is also one of the reasons you continue to be alive. Your mother was God's instrument to bring you into this world.

Motherhood, of course, involves much more sacrifice and work than giving birth. A mom is not merely someone who gives birth, but someone who continues to love and nurture her children. So some of you might have moms who did not give birth to you. They adopted you, and this is good. They made a conscious decision to love you, even though you were not theirs, but now you are. This is a beautiful picture of what God the Father has done for you in Christ Jesus. Your mother continued to love and nurture you. The essence of motherhood is to give yourself to your children.

But for some of you, your mothers may not have been very good when compared to other mothers. There are no words to make this okay. Or, if there are words, I don't know what they are. And, yet, by God's grace, he still used your mother for good in your life. She was God's instrument to bring you into this world, and you probably learned more from her than you think. And it is still God's will that you honor you. The commandment is not, "Honor your father and your mother as long as you think they are worthy of honor." It is simply, "Honor your father and mother." So Scripture teaches us, today and every day, to honor our mothers.

Now let me speak just to the moms. You are a gift of God to your children. And I say that without qualification. You may feel inadequate sometimes. Okay. That's probably normal. You are a gift of God to your children. What I mean is, your heavenly Father, and their heavenly Father, loves your children far more than you can ever imagine. You are imperfect. You are sinful. But God gave you to your children. He gave you to them to protect them, nurture them, and teach them God's Word. There will be much sin and failure on your part. We sin the most against the people we are closest to. Your heavenly Father forgives you for Christ's sake. And he continues to love your children perfectly. He is watching over them too. And he has given you to them for their good. Amen.

The epistle lesson for the Fourth Sunday of Easter comes from *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*, chapter 7, verses 9 through 17. It is on page 871 of the pew Bible. In this Scripture lesson, the apostle John sees a vision of the Church in heaven, and it is glorious. Please stand as you are able for God's Holy Word. From Revelation 7, beginning at verse 9, we read in Jesus' name.

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⁹ After this 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, ¹⁰ and crying out with a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!” ¹¹ And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, ¹² saying, “Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.”

¹³ Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, “Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?” ¹⁴ I said to him, “Sir, you know.” And he said to me, “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.

¹⁵ “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.

¹⁶ They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore;
the sun shall not strike them,
nor any scorching heat.

¹⁷ For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd,
and he will guide them to springs of living water,
and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

He is risen, indeed! Alleluia!

Life can be difficult. We face various different trials. Some are big, some are small, and sometimes the small ones feel the biggest in the moment. Have you ever noticed that? It's usually easy to see when it's over. With the small ones, anyway, we look back and say, “Well, that wasn't so bad.” But it might have felt big in the moment, like when your kid is screaming in the middle of the night, and you feel like it's never going to stop, and I mean *never*, but then it does, and everyone is asleep in five minutes. Sometimes, if we can recover a bit of perspective and remind ourselves that our troubles aren't as big as they feel, we can calm ourselves down a little bit. Sometimes that works—not always, but sometimes. It helps to put our troubles into perspective.

With the big ones, it helps to put them into the perspective of eternity. Scriptures like this one remind us that whatever troubles we encounter in this life, they cannot take our greatest gift away from us. They cannot take salvation away from us. They cannot snatch us out of our Father's hand (John 10:29). When we compare the troubles of this life with the joy of eternal salvation, there really isn't any comparison.

Some of the troubles of this life can be quite serious, and I certainly don't want to minimize them. Knowing that something better is coming doesn't make the troubles of this life go away. When you face troubles I always want to remind you of our blessed hope—that, because Jesus died and rose again, when he comes again, he will raise the dead, transform us after his image, and bring us into the new creation. This is our blessed hope. Whatever troubles we experience,

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we must cling to this truth: Jesus bought us with his blood, and he will right every wrong on the Last Day.

And I know, you still have troubles in this life, and they are still real. God cares about these. You are God's beloved child; he cares about every detail of your life. And it might actually be a really big problem. I'm often tempted to say that everything is going to be okay, because I want it to be okay, and I know that's what you want me to say. But I can't always say it, because we don't always have a promise from God that it will be okay, at least not according to our definition of "okay." Sometimes things turn out just as bad, or even worse, than we feared. Where is God in this?

The basic message of Revelation is that God is right where he is supposed to be: on his throne. And when we say that God is on his throne, that doesn't mean that he is distant from us. It doesn't mean that he's just chilling out in heaven minding his own business while we suffer down here. When we speak of God on this throne, we mean that he is in a place of power and authority.

There's a lot of scary stuff in the book of Revelation—wars, natural disasters, persecutions. These things cause tribulation—even "Great Tribulation"—for God's saints. What's interesting, though, is that all of it occurs at God's command and in his timing.

I'm not going to even try to explain what all the symbolism in Revelation means. That would take too long, and, besides that, anyone who thinks they can explain everything probably has an ego problem. So I'll just give you a few of the basics.

First, the full title of the book is *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (1:1). It's one of the few books where the title is stated in the opening verse. And the title of the book is important. Sometimes you'll hear people call it "Revelations," with an "s" at the end. But that's not right. The title is singular: *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*. We usually just call it "Revelation" for short. The book consists of multiple visions the apostle John saw, so that's probably why some people think the title is plural. But, even though there are multiple visions, there is only one revelation: Jesus Christ. So the purpose of the book is to reveal Jesus Christ.

This is one of the places where I think a lot of interpretations of Revelation go wrong. They focus so much attention on the details of the visions and try to identify what historical events they might correspond to that they lose sight of Jesus in the book. But the whole point of the book is to reveal Jesus. This is essential to keep in mind at all times.

Second, it's important to remember that Revelation was written to a real, historical audience. In chapters two and three, there are seven letters to seven churches. And these were real churches in the First Century. The letters even mention specific issues in these churches. Many of these churches were facing, or were about to face, serious tribulations, including persecution and even martyrdom. So the book was intended to bring these Christians comfort. The visions John saw communicated the heavenly reality to these Christians who were suffering below. And the book certainly has meaning for us—it is God's Word—but it's important to recognize that it was first given to them. Some interpretations of Revelation try to match the visions John saw with events that are happening today. This approach is so near-sighted that it forgets the original audience. It may be that the visions depict events that have been continuing for two thousand years, and will continue until Jesus returns, but we should not imagine that the book applies more to us than it did to the original audience.

And third, it's important to notice what kind of literature this is. It is apocalyptic literature. Like poetry, much of it is symbolic and figurative. That doesn't mean it's not real. The symbols

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and figures point to realities, but we should practice a little caution and humility in trying to identify exactly what. Most importantly, we want to keep our eyes on the big picture: this is *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*. The whole point is to show us the glory of our risen Savior, Jesus Christ, for in him we have life and salvation.

So this particular passage comes between the sixth and seventh seals.

I should explain what that means. In Revelation there are seven seals, seven trumpets, and seven bowls of God's wrath. And the scary stuff that happens on earth comes about because of these seals, trumpets, and bowls. First there are seven seals, and the only one worthy to break the seals and open the scroll is Jesus, the Lamb who was slain (5:3, 9). And as each seal is broken, there is some kind of calamity or tribulation on the earth. So it's interesting that Jesus is actually the one who sends trouble on the earth.

And this is strangely comforting. It means that, regardless of whatever chaos we may see in the world around us, our Savior is in control. It doesn't mean that he causes evil to happen. God does not delight in evil. But it does mean that he is in control, and at least some of what we see around us is actually the wrath of God. And, while the wrath of God is certainly not safe, God's saints are safe from it. It is a comfort to know that our Savior is in control.

It reminds me of when I was a child, sitting in the front of a canoe with my dad in the back. All of the sudden, the canoe starts rocking back and forth. I got scared, because I thought we were in trouble. Then I looked back and discovered that it was just my dad, rocking the canoe on purpose. I still felt uneasy, but I knew nothing bad was going to happen, because he was in control. It's not a perfect analogy, of course, because my dad was just joking around, and Jesus is not. The point is that when Jesus is in control—and he always is!—we are safe.

So the text for today comes between the sixth and seventh seals. Some of the first six seals include violence between men, famine, death, and earthquakes. There are even Christians martyred during these seals. It's not pleasant.

Then there is a break before the seventh seal. And the seventh seal isn't just one thing, but it's the start of the seven trumpets. Things are about to go from bad to worse. But before we get to that, there is a break.

The first part of chapter seven, the part we didn't read, is a picture of the Church on earth. An angel cries out, "Do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees, until we have sealed the servants of our God on their foreheads" (7:3). Now what does that mean? It probably doesn't mean that an angel is going to give you a tattoo of a cross on your forehead. It simply means that God knows his own, he has placed his Name on you, and the angels know you are his. God will not remove his people from the earth, but we are protected from his wrath. It doesn't even mean Christians won't be killed during this time of tribulation. The opposite is actually true. We know that Christians are being killed and will be killed precisely because they are Christians (5:11). But it does mean we will be spared from the wrath of God.

And then the part that we did read is a picture of the Church in heaven. It is a great multitude from every nation, tribe, people, and language. No one could even number this multitude. They were all dressed in white robes, worshipping God the Father and the Lamb, Jesus Christ.

As John is watching this, one of the twenty-four elders asks him, "Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?" (7:13). The elder, of course, knows the answer, so John flips the question back to him. And the elder says, "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." (7:14).

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This, also, is meant to be an encouragement for God's saints on earth. We cannot see this now. In this life we will face tribulation. Our tribulation may even be great. At various times, and in various places, God's people have even faced death for their testimony of Jesus Christ. And at the present time, more than at any other time in the history of the Church, Christians are being killed for their faith. We don't see it near us, but we saw it a few weeks ago in Sri Lanka. And that was just the tip of the iceberg. Martyrdom is far more common in other countries. Nigeria is a prime example right now, and there are several more.

There is tribulation in this life. But, whatever tribulation we may face, it is only temporary. "These are the ones *coming out* of the great tribulation." For these saints, their suffering is over. Now they stand in glory, clothed in white robes that have been bleached with Jesus' blood.

This is one of the great ironies in this text. "They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb." Blood stains. It doesn't remove stains. If you ever get mustard on your shirt, don't bleed on it. That won't work. It's such an odd thing to say that they have made their robes white in the blood of the Lamb. And we're supposed to recognize how odd this is. This is a different kind of blood. This is the blood of God.

The color white symbolizes purity. And Jesus' blood cleanses us from sin. The point is that he has suffered the punishment for all our sin. His blood atones for our sins, and because of this blood, we are made pure. So you are clothed with the righteousness of Jesus Christ. Imagine a kid who comes in for dinner after playing in the mud all day. His clothes are all dirty. But his mother has clean clothes, including a clean white shirt. He exchanges his filthy clothes for clean ones, and everyone is happy about it. Your robe has been washed. It has been washed in the blood of the Lamb. You are clothed with his righteousness, and you are cleansed from sin. This is a gift to you.

The other great irony is that the Lamb is the Shepherd. Did you notice that? The Lamb is the Shepherd. It might seem like this is just mixing metaphors, but there is more to it than that. The point is that we are led by someone who has been through everything we go through. He has become as we are, but without sin. Like sheep led by a lamb, we are led by our God who became man. We are led by a God who knows what it is to be human. He knows what it is to suffer. He knows what it is to be wronged by your family, betrayed by your friends, and even to suffer death unjustly. He knows what it's like to be hungry and thirsty. He knows what it's like to face tribulation. We have a God and shepherd who did not hold himself aloof from us. But for the sake of his sheep, he became the Lamb. He became the spotless Lamb of God who was sacrificed for the sin of the world. He has suffered everything humans suffer, including death. He has passed through this death and risen victorious on the other side so that he might lead us through it as well. Even as we close our eyes and breathe our last, we know that our shepherd has already done that, and he has done it for us.

So he will carry us through to the other side, where he guides us to springs of living water and wipes away every tear. The Lamb is our Shepherd.

Dear saints,

In this world you will have trouble. You will face tribulation. You may even face great tribulation. But whatever the world may take from you, it cannot take your white robe. It cannot take the righteousness of Jesus Christ away from you. You have been washed in the blood of the lamb, his righteousness has been given to you as a gift, and when the tribulation of this life is

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over, your white robe will remain. Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again. He will raise you from the dead, transform you into the perfect image of God, and lead you into his new creation. He is your shepherd. He will guide you to springs of living water. He will wipe away every tear. Amen.

He who testifies to these things says, **“Surely I am coming soon.”** Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!

The grace of the Lord Jesus be with [you] all. Amen. (Rev. 22:20-21)