

St. Andrew's Anglican Church, Douglas, GA

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ Rector

Scripture: Revelation 7:2-12

"Behold the Lamb!"

As Christians, we are blessed to know a special kind of holiness that is only available through a relationship with Jesus Christ. Through that relationship - all believers in Jesus Christ can be called "saints" – with a little "s." This morning – I want to suggest to you a much clearer picture of that holiness – as reflected through the image that Jesus gave to the Apostle John, on the island of Patmos – in the Book of Revelation. John saw some saints of God proclaiming praise, glory, honor, strength, might and wisdom to the Lamb who is seated at the center of the throne. The Lamb rightly deserves this worship and praise, because **salvation only comes from the Lamb of God**. You might remember that it was John the Baptist who testified to this truth about Jesus by the Jordan River in John 1:29 when he said "*Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!*"

The Apostle John describes '*Salvation to our God*' as the free gift that God gives to those who believe in Him. Paul reminds us in Romans 6:23 that "*the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.*" When we sin – we earn death, which is what we deserve - our "wages" - but we do not get what we deserve because of what Jesus did for us on the cross! John realized this as he saw all of the praise that the Lamb of God deserved. That reminds me of what Paul wrote to Timothy. "*For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all men--the testimony given in its proper time*" (1 Timothy 2:5-6). John was living in exile on a Greek island in the Aegean Sea called Patmos because of his faith. John survived poisoning by the Romans, and so he was exiled. Christ gave him the testimony of the Lamb of God – so that we might know.

John saw this large crowd and he wrote "*After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could count, from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb.*" (Revelation 7:9) His description of the throne in the center and the growing circle of all those who were praising God - is nothing short of incredible. He says that these saints are from all the corners on the earth—from every tribe and nation and language. This group, that is worshipping the Lamb, is expanding; so no one could possibly count them— it is almost beyond our imagination. John 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 – a flashback to His triumphant entry into the earthly Jerusalem on the Sunday before He was crucified.

This huge crowd cried out in a loud voice: "*Salvation to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.*" (Revelation 7:10) They were there - not because of what they had done - but because of what the Lamb of God had done for them **and had done through them** in their lives. The Lamb made salvation possible for them; providing robes that covered up their own sinfulness. They stood before the Lamb of God, along with the living creatures and the angels

and the elders, covered with the robe of Christ's holiness – and with the Redemption that He provided for them. This awe inspiring image is one that cannot easily be erased.

For each one of these saints –during their earthly life - they had received the grace of God's divine forgiveness. John has a conversation with an elder that describes this. The elder asks John: *"These in white robes--who are they, and where did they come from?" I answered, "Sir, you know." And he said, "These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb."* (Revelation 7:13-14)

Depending on what you may have read - the word 'tribulation' is used quite often in describing "the end times." **The word tribulation means "troubles and hardship."** These people who are standing in the white robes are there because the robes have been made white through the blood of Jesus Christ. We should never lose sight of the most important truth –the fact that the **blood of the Lamb purifies us from all sin** – no matter how terrible that sin is – we are forgiven, when we repent!

I want to suggest to you this morning - **none of us deserve to wear white robes; we do not deserve to stand before the holy throne of God**, yet the Lord promises each and every one of us - by faith, through the grace of God, that we WILL stand there! It is **not because of what we have done** but **because of what Christ has done**. The white robes symbolize God's divine gift of forgiveness. Those saints stood there, not with their own purity, but with the robes that were given to them - cleansed by the blood of the Lamb. It is a **reflection of Christ's Holiness, Christ's Righteousness, and the redemption that Christ has won for us!**

We all know that there are hardships in this world; there are troubles and tribulations that each one of us must face. All you need do is turn on the news, read the paper, or check your bank balance. In the early church, the disciples were thrown into prison simply because they preached the Gospel. John is exiled on Patmos because of the persecution of the church under the rule of the Emperor Domitian, during one of the worst times in the history of the church. Yet, what did the early apostles say? Acts 14 tells us *"Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God"* (Acts 14:22) When believers leave this world, they leave behind all of the tribulation and hardship, and they stand before God because of His divine forgiveness.

When you and I look in the rear view mirror of our lives we see two things: we see God's fingerprints all over everything, and then we see the effects of sin, which are 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. Just as none of us can escape death or taxes; none of us can escape sin. Remember this, sin has consequences!

It is very hard for us to accept this, but there are places in this world, people in this world who are being persecuted for one reason – they are Christians (carrying a Bible or mentioning the

name of Jesus in the wrong company)! Persecution occurs whenever believers are denied the protection of religious freedom, prevented from converting to Christianity because of legal or social threats (or worse – family threats), physically attacked or killed because of their faith, forced to leave their job or home because of the threat of violence, or imprisoned and interrogated, and often tortured for refusing to deny their faith – or even for something as simple as owning a Bible. Did you know that Christians face persecution in more than 60 countries around the world? It is a sad truth – and once that you do not hear when you turn on the nightly news!

Imagine that you are sitting in church – and in the middle of the service a team of soldiers come storming in. They are waving guns and want each of us to get on the floor. They would challenge each one to renounce your belief in Jesus and proclaim Allah as God. They will not accept anything less or they will shoot you, or even worse - arrest and torture you and your family. This is the sad truth – and it is happening, not some fictitious tale out of Hollywood. This is happening every day – and sadly is getting closer to home.

In Syria there are 21.8 million people (1.3 million of which are Christians.) As the civil conflict inside Syria becomes worse, targeted violence against Christians has gotten worse as well. The Syrian opposition is increasingly ‘Islamizing’, and Christians are becoming more vulnerable in all walks of life. Many Christians were reported to have been abducted, physically harmed or killed, and many churches have been damaged or destroyed. On October 21st of this year, Islamist militias (ISIS) invaded the ancient Christian settlement of Sadad, killing at least 45 people, and injuring many more. Why? Jesus!

In Iraq, there has been an increase in attacks and threats against Christians. Islamist terrorist groups, influenced by what is going on in Syria (again ISIS), are increasing in number. One of their aims is to empty the country of Christians, and this situation is aggravated by the government’s total authority. According to a local source, every two or three days a Christian is killed, kidnapped or abused. Since they are a minority, Christians are an easy target for kidnappers. The security for Christians is deteriorating. In Iraq the population is 35.9 million people (330,000 are Christians.)

Sadly, quite often people’s reaction to persecution is “oh, that is over there” or “that doesn’t have anything to do with Anglicans.” Well, let me tell you about the Reverend Canon Andrew White who has been the vicar of St George's Church, Baghdad, the only Anglican Church in Iraq. His life has been in constant danger and he has had as many as 35 Iraqi bodyguards. He just said on October 12 that “he was told to leave for his own safety after Islamic State militants got within a couple miles of the Iraqi capital. ‘My dear friend the Archbishop of Canterbury has made clear that my profile is so high, I am British and very pro-Israel, which would place me at incredibly high risk.’” He is now in Jerusalem.

Can you imagine fearing for your own safety just because you love Jesus? Or you believe in Israel? Persecution is very real! So we need to pray – ask God’s protection over these Christians!

While many Christians suffer here on earth - John describes for us some of the blessings of heaven "*He who sits on the throne will spread His tabernacle over them.*" (Revelation 7:15) The angels, the saints – they are there day and night – worshipping Almighty God. How awesome is that? Nothing to worry about, nothing to fear, nothing to do except praise God! He says the Lamb of God who sits on the throne will spread his tabernacle – His tent over them. Spreading a tent over people is making those people family! None of us can even fathom the blessedness of heaven. We only get a very little glimpse of it and a small understanding of it. But even that just blows me away!

John continues with his description: "*They will hunger no longer, nor thirst anymore; nor will the sun beat down on them, nor any heat; for the Lamb in the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and will guide them to springs of the water of life; and God will wipe every tear from their eyes.*" (Revelation 7:16-17) Can you imagine not being hungry? Not worrying about bills? Not being thirsty? John also makes a wonderful connection – 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, just as He told the Samaritan woman who came and sat at the well with Jesus.

As believers of Jesus Christ we know for certain that heaven is our home, and 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! God saves people from all tribes and nations. That is the blessedness of heaven. It's almost the exact opposite of what you and I are used to experiencing while living here on earth. It says no more thirst, nor hunger, no more pain or suffering, no more tears or sorrow. Heaven is indeed a far greater place to look forward to than anything we have on earth

The Apostle John, seeing these visions, was encouraged and strengthened. That is why the Lord told Him to write it down for us believers today. We need to never to forget that the Lord is our salvation. Salvation comes from the Lamb of God, who is also our Good Shepherd. He provides for us day after day, year after year of our earthly lives, by giving us His divine forgiveness even though we don't deserve it and we cannot earn it. He covers up the blackness of our sin with His robe of righteousness - so that eventually, each and every one of us will enjoy in person the vision that John saw. Now that is an excellent reason for living!