

**St. Peter Evangelical Lutheran Church, Modesto, California
The Fourth Sunday of Easter
May 2, 2004**

Sermon by Pastor Jonathan Micheel

Revelation 7:13-17

¹³ Then one of the elders asked me, "These in white robes—who are they, and where did they come from?"

¹⁴ 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. 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 spread his tent over them.

¹⁶ Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst.

The sun will not beat upon them, nor any scorching heat.

¹⁷ 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."

(NIV)

Complete Security Is Ours, Now and Forever

Revelation can be an intimidating part of the Bible. One reason for that is because it's a different type of literature than many other parts of the Bible. In many sections of the Bible, like Matthew, Mark, Luke, John and Acts, the inspired writers tell us events that happened—Jesus traveled here and said this, etc. But Revelation is different. Revelation is what's called apocalyptic literature. Apocalyptic literature is writing through which God reveals what will happen to his people, both in the present and in the future. And God makes these revelations by using bold and vivid word pictures and symbols. For instance, when God is revealing how Satan will work, he shows a picture of a red dragon with multiple heads and horns (Revelation 12:3). Or, when God reveals how four powerful forces will be at work in the last era of human history (which is the one we're living in right now), he pictures four horsemen, each a different color, the so-called Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.

God also uses numbers in a symbolic way in Revelation. Often, when God is referring to himself, the number three is used in some way. Why three? Because God is triune, we think—one God, yet three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. When the earth or the people of the earth are mentioned, the number four is sometimes used. At the beginning of Revelation 7, the “four corners of the earth” are referred to. Seven is another number that comes up. Seven is used usually when God is revealing something about how he interacts with the people of the world. It could be that three (God’s number) and four (the earth’s number) equal seven. And when God is describing the result of his gracious work among the people of the earth, how he brings people together in faith, the number twelve occurs—three times four.

And there’s one other number that occurs throughout Revelation. It’s a number denoting completeness or perfection. When God is referring to something being full or complete, he uses the number... can you guess? (A hint: it’s the number of fingers and toes God created people to have.) It’s the number ten. When God groups things in tens or multiples of ten, he’s sending the message that something is complete.

In the Second Lesson today (Revelation 7: 9-17) we encounter the number ten again. It’s not obvious, but it’s there. Listen to how John describes the people of God gathered in glory, and count the facets of his description:

“They are before the throne of God
and serve him day and night in his temple;
and he who sits on the throne will spread his tent over them.
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.”

How many things did you count? Ten. What is God communicating to us? It’s this: He provides his people complete security—complete security on the other side of Judgment Day, but also complete security now. Why can we be sure that we have complete security now and forever? Two reasons: because Jesus is the Lamb, and because Jesus is the Shepherd.

Because Jesus is the Lamb

“Who are these people? And how did they get here?” These are questions we’re led to ask when we, like John the Apostle who wrote down these visions of Revelation, see this great crowd of people in heavenly glory. Here they are, gathered around God’s throne. No more pain. No more tears. No more death. Who are these people, and how did they get here?

In John's case, one of the elders (sort of a tour guide through some of the visions God is giving John) asks him to answer these questions. Then one of the elders asked me, "These in white robes—who are they, and where did they come from?" John replies, "Sir, you know"—his way of saying, "You're going to have to tell me the answer." So the elder does: And he said, "These are they who have come out of the great tribulation..."

"The great tribulation"—what is that? It simply refers to the age that you and I are living in right now, the time between Christ's first coming and his final coming. The great tribulation is not, as the *Left Behind* books assert, some 3½ or 7-year period of time after a rapture of believers. The great tribulation is now, when all kinds of forces are working to pull Christians away from Jesus. This is the time when the world is filled with war, famine, disease and death. These people, then, who are coming out of the great tribulation, are people who have been delivered safely to heaven.

How did they get there? Did these people somehow impress God so much that he rewarded them by bringing them to heaven? Did they clean up their lives so well that they made themselves fit to live in the presence of the holy God forever? No, not at all. Listen: they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. "They have washed their robes..." Do you wash things that are already clean, or things that are dirty? Things that are dirty, right? These people, who now stand in God's presence in peace and joy, are people who formerly were dirty. We're not talking about dirty clothes here, but dirty lives—lives stained with rebellion against God, dirty with uncaring attitudes about God's Word and his business, streaked with foul language and hurtful speech, encrusted with old grudges and stubbornness, soiled with lovelessness toward God and other people. In other words, these are people like you and me.

So how did filthy people like this get into God's presence? God washed them. He washed them in blood, the blood of the Lamb. There's a strange image; to get something clean you don't usually dip it in blood. To understand what it means to be washed in the blood of the Lamb, you need to know who the Lamb is. It's Jesus. The Lamb harkens back to the Passover in the Old Testament. At the first Passover, God went through Egypt, where his people were held as slaves, and he killed the firstborn son in every house. But if you had taken a lamb, slaughtered it, and painted its blood on your doorpost, you were spared that death. The lamb died, and its blood saved you from death. In the same way, Jesus died, shedding his blood willingly. Why did he die? He died so that we could live. Jesus died to pay the full and dreadful price for all of our uncleanness. We should have had our blood shed and worse for our filthiness in the sight of God. But God loved us so much that he sent his Son, Jesus, to be punished in our place. Since Jesus, the Lamb of God, shed his blood and suffered hell for our sins, we are spared that sentence.

To be washed in the blood of the Lamb means to trust that what Jesus did was real and that it is for you. None of us has to purify ourselves and make ourselves clean to God—which is good, because we do not have that capability. But Jesus can make us clean, and he does. Believing in Jesus, we are fit for heaven. Because of Jesus, people like you and me—people who are dirty with all kinds of stains—can enter heavenly glory.

And there's more. Not only will we someday join this great crowd of people standing around God's throne, free from all sadness and pain—not only will we someday be clean in the eyes of God, but we are right now! You see, being washed clean of sin is not just a future possibility, it's a present reality. Right now you, because Jesus is the Lamb, you have the complete security of knowing that God loves you and accepts you. You don't have to wonder, "Am I good enough for God? What if he finds out about (insert your worst sin here)?" No, because Jesus is the Lamb, you are right now forgiven by God. In fact, right now, through Jesus, God looks at you as someone who has never sinned, not even once! So much for living life driven by guilt and shame and the pressure of pleasing God. You are holy in God's sight, because Jesus is the Lamb.

Because Jesus is the Shepherd

Today, as you know, is what we call Good Shepherd Sunday. For centuries, Christians have paid special attention to this imagery on one of the Sundays in the Easter season. We usually read or sing Psalm 23 and part of John 10, but it's also fitting to listen to these verses of Revelation 7. Here Jesus is given another name besides Lamb, and that name is Shepherd. It's an intriguing phrase: For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd. Jesus, the Lamb, also acts as a shepherd. What does a shepherd do? He cares for sheep. He makes sure they are well fed. He protects them. He nurtures them. He binds up their wounds. What a perfect picture of Jesus!

In the context of Revelation, we're reminded that Jesus' shepherding work will culminate after the Last Day. In glory, all of us, his people, will experience fully how he loves us and cares for us. As we mentioned before, this security will be complete; remember the list of ten facets of Christ's care? Let's look at them again.

- ...they are before the throne of God... Sinners like us should only tremble in fear to stand in front of God. But no more fear will exist in heaven. Why not? Because Jesus, the Lamb, has washed us and made us pure and holy in God's sight.
- ...and serve him day and night in his temple... Part of the frustration we often feel in our lives is caused by a lack of fulfillment. We sense that we're breaking our backs for nothing. In heaven all those feelings will be gone, and we will get to realize that we are serving the glorious God who made and redeemed us.

- ...and he who sits on the throne will spread his tent over them. Shelter—in heaven Jesus will “spread his tent” over us, sheltering us and protecting us from all evil. In fact, evil and sin and everything they bring with them will be banished forever. Only goodness and gladness will remain.
- Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. Now, I think that in heaven we will eat and drink. Heaven is pictured, after all, as a wedding banquet later in Revelation (19:9). But hunger and thirst—these remind us of needs that are not met. Unsatisfied needs will be no more. Jesus, our Shepherd will provide for us perfectly.
- The sun will not beat upon them, nor any scorching heat. After last week’s high 90s, we remember what intense heat is like. Anybody’s air conditioner break down? In Biblical times, with no relief from the burning Mideastern sun, heat could be deadly. But all such danger will be gone when Christ takes us to be with him in the new heaven and new earth.
- For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water. One of the things a shepherd had to do was to make sure his sheep were well fed and well watered. And in Biblical times (as it still is today in California), water was at a premium. Water meant life. Jesus, the Good Shepherd, will never let us die. He will supply us with never-ending life.
- And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes. We can’t escape tears. They come because we feel sadness, grief, anger, desperation. To live a life without tears, without anything to make us sad—it’s unimaginable. But the Good Shepherd wants us to know that such a life will be a reality. Every tear wiped away, every cause for tears gone.

Complete security—it’s waiting for you and me, because Jesus is the perfect Shepherd. But again, this kind of security is not just a future possibility, but also a present reality. Not only will Jesus shepherd us in heaven, but he is also shepherding us right now. Granted, we still must live with a lot: unfulfilled needs, danger and disaster, dissatisfaction and frustration, and a whole lot of tears. But even in the midst of all these things, our shepherd guides us. In this world filled with death, Jesus leads us to life. He speaks our sins forgiven, and they are! He releases us from spiritual death and slavery, and we are free! The Lamb gives us his blood and says, “Drink; this was shed for you for complete forgiveness,” and we are fed and nourished by his power. He’s in the world, working to provide for us—usually behind the scenes, as he works in and through people who love us and care for us. And he lives to wipe away our tears and set limits on our grief. Even death, which probably causes us more tears than anything else, must listen to Jesus, because he has defeated death by his rising from the dead.

Security can be hard to find. Job security—there's not much of that these days. We have an alarm system on our church to provide security, but considering the number of false alarms we have, that's not all it's cracked up to be. Security in relationships—also hard to come by, since people let us down. And what does the lack of security lead to? More disappointment, more discontent, more fear, more tears.

But friends, in this world, there is such a thing as security. You will find it in the one who laid down his life for you, the perfect Lamb. You will find it in the one who never fails in his care for you, the perfect Shepherd. Go to Jesus, and he won't let you down. Little lamb, rest in his arms. Amen.