

St. Bartholomew's Church in the Town of Tonawanda, N.Y

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Scripture: Revelation 7:2-4, 9-17

"Behold the Lamb!"

It was September of 2002 – my first week of seminary at Trinity School for Ministry. On Tuesdays and Thursdays, we attended a class called Spiritual Formation. What a group we were! Fr. Mike Lonto from St. Mary's in Salamanca was there, Canon Daryl Fenton of the ACNA, and my wife Marilyn was a member of that class also, along with about 35 other students – we could basically be described as deer in the headlights. Our first week of seminary – and our professor greeted us with **"good morning saints!"** Let me tell you, this took some getting used to! Having grown up as a Roman Catholic – I was putty in the hands of the Dominican Nuns in Parochial School – and believe me - I had **never** been called a saint before. Being a good, solid citizen who would "never, ever make fun" --- I promptly took my name card and proudly wrote above my first name "saint" – it said St. John! "Hey, I could get used to this." Well, my best buddy throughout seminary – Fr. Dave Newhart – now the rector of St. Elizabeth's in Sebastian, Florida, was an even bigger card than I was. Not one to be outdone – he went to town on his name card- and wrote in BIG letters – "SINNER DAVE." And let me tell you - that funny label stayed with him right on through graduation! Saint John and Sinner Dave – affectionately known as "the Sons of Thunder," but THAT is another story – for another sermon altogether! Saints indeed!

Last week, Fr. Ward spoke of the holiness that is only available through a relationship with Jesus Christ. He reminded us that all believers in Jesus Christ are saints – with a little "s." This morning – I want to suggest to you a clear picture of that holiness – as reflected through the image that Our Lord gave to the Apostle John, on the island of Patmos – in the Book of Revelation. John saw some saints of God proclaiming praise and glory and honor and strength and might and wisdom to the Lamb who is seated at the center of the throne. All of this worship and praise belongs to the Lamb, because salvation only comes from the Lamb of God. It was John the Baptist who proclaimed this truth about Jesus in John 1:29 when he said *"Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"* The Apostle John writes *'Salvation to our God'* of the free gift that God gives to those who believe in Him. Paul writes in Romans 6:23 *"For 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, our wages - but we do not get what we deserve because of what Jesus did for us! John realized that as he looked and saw all the praise that the Lamb of God deserved. He was reminded 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). Remember John was living in exile on the island of Patmos because of his faith and Christ gave him the testimony of the Lamb of God – in its proper time.

John saw the large crowd that was gathered: *"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) John also saw the four living creatures, the elders and the angels. His description of the throne in the center and the growing circle of those praising God - is nothing short of awesome. He says that all the saints are from all the corners on the earth—from every tribe and nation and language. The group that is worshipping the Lamb is expanding; no one could possibly count them—almost beyond imagination. John description 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 – recalling His triumphant entry into the earthly Jerusalem on the Sunday before He was crucified.

This great multitude 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. He had made salvation possible for them; providing robes for them that covered up their own sinfulness. They stood before Him - the Lamb of God, along with the living creatures and the angels and the elders, covered up with the robe of Christ’s righteousness – His holiness – and the Redemption that He provided for them. This image is one that cannot easily be erased. It is inspiring to say the least!

For each one of these saints –during their earthly life - they had received the grace of God’s divine forgiveness. John has a discussion with an elder that describes this. The elder asks John: “*These who are clothed in the white robes, who are they, and where have they come from? I said to him, “My lord, you know.” And he said to me, “These are the ones who come out of the great tribulation, and 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 a lot in describing the end times. Some have said there are going to be **seven years of tribulation before the Lord returns**, while there are others who have said there’s going to be **seven years of tribulation after the Lord returns**. There are some who have said when the Lord returns there is going to be **seven years of tribulation in the midst of all of that. The Lord tells us that there is tribulation**. I might add that there is **no number seven here** or in any part of scripture connected with any tribulation. When you read something about seven years of tribulation, it is interpretation, conjecture, and opinion, much of which is drawn from the book of Daniel.

What does the Lord mean by tribulation? **He means troubles and hardship**. We don’t want to get hung up on trying to find or debate details of the tribulation or the rapture – a word which cannot found anywhere in Scripture. By doing so we would be missing the point that the elder makes here in Revelation chapter 7; saying that these people who are standing here in the white robes are here because their robes have been made white through the blood of Christ. I am not here this morning to debate the tribulation or the rapture. Scores of movies and books have been made as well as many great theological papers and sermons. We should not lose sight of the most important truth –the fact that the blood of the Lamb purifies us from all sin!

I want to suggest to you this morning - that **you and I do not deserve to wear white robes; you and I do not deserve to stand before the throne of God**, yet the Lord promises each and every one of us - by faith, by 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!** God speaks through the Prophet Isaiah: “*Come now, and let us reason together,*” Says the LORD, “*Though your sins are as scarlet, they will be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they will be like wool.*” (Isaiah 1:18) This is God’s promise to sinners who repent through Jesus Christ. Sinners like you and me - purified by God’s divine forgiveness.

We all know that there are hardships in this world; there are troubles and tribulations that each one of us must face. Just 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, one of the worst times in the history of the church. Yet, what did the early apostles say? Acts 14 tells us after they were released, "*Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.*" (Acts 14:22) The Lord says the saints have come through the tribulation. When a believer leaves this world, he has left behind all tribulation. He has left behind all hardship. He comes to stand before God because of God's divine forgiveness.

When you and I look at the rear view mirror of our lives 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. None of us can escape death; none of us can escape sin. God speak through Ezekiel, the prophet, who writes: "*Behold, all souls are Mine; the soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is Mine. The soul who sins will die.*" (Ezekiel 18:4)

Just as no one has escaped death, so no one escapes sin. Believers in Christ Jesus are thankful because by God's divine forgiveness - our sins are forgiven. The blackness of our tarnished heart is covered by the blood of Jesus Christ so that we, like the saints who are standing before the throne of God, will one day also stand there with robes of righteousness. HIS righteousness!

Salvation comes from the Lamb;

- the Lamb who is our shepherd;
- who provides us with divine forgiveness
- And provides us with eternal life.

Looking at Revelation and seeing the visions of John, sometimes they are almost beyond human comprehension. Time and again we find the same people gathered there, the angels, the saints—singing out, '*Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.*' "*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, saying, "Amen, blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might, be to our God forever and ever. Amen."*" (Revelation 7:11-12)

John then describes for us some of the blessings of heaven "*For this reason, they are before the throne of God; and they serve Him day and night in His temple; and 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? Sign me up! Nothing to worry about, nothing to fear, nothing to do except praise God; they don't get tired so they can do it day and night - forever and ever. 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. 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 being thirsty?

John 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! Do you remember the Samaritan woman who came and sat at the well with Jesus? He talked to her about the water of life. At the end of the conversation with this woman – Jesus says, *“whoever drinks of the water that I will give him shall never thirst; but the water that I will give him will become in him a well of water springing up to eternal life.”* (John 4:14)

As believers of Jesus Christ as the Son of God – as the Lamb of God - we know as a certainty that heaven is our home. We are confident 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, for believers from every nation. In the beginning of chapter seven, it talks about the twelve thousand from the different tribes. John declares the saints are innumerable! They are from every nation and tribe. It is true-you and I are not Jews by birth. Does that mean that you and I do not have salvation? Certainly not! You and I are Jews by faith. We are the children, the sons and daughters of Abraham. The Lord tells us that. The Lord reminds us that we are saved by God's grace, not by birth.

In LUKE 2:30-32 Simeon proclaims while holding the Christ child *“For my eyes have seen Your salvation, Which You have prepared in the presence of all peoples, A LIGHT OF REVELATION TO THE GENTILES, And the glory of Your people Israel.”* 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. I wholeheartedly agree with Moses when he writes in EXODUS 15:2, *“The LORD is my strength and song, and He has become my salvation; He is my God, and I will praise Him; My father's God, and I will exalt Him.”* Sometimes we put our trust and confidence in the wrong things. When we repent and ask God's forgiveness – He indeed is our strength and our song – and our salvation!

John, seeing these visions, was encouraged and strengthened. That is why the Lord told Him to write it down for us believers today. We are never to forget that the Lord is our salvation. Our 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 a reason for living!

In closing, I want to share with you the message that the Apostle Peter wrote in his first letter, during a time of great persecution for the church. This letter is full of encouragement, reminding us that no matter what you face and no matter what you lose on this earth - you still have God's salvation. He encourages when he writes, *“Greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, so that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ; and though you have not seen Him, you love Him, and though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, obtaining as the outcome of your faith the salvation of your souls.”* (1 Peter 1:6-9)

My brothers and sisters in Christ – WE do indeed have reason to rejoice, give thanks and sing - for **WE are the saints of God!**