

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Watertown, WI**

“White”

Rev. David K. Groth

All Saints’ Sunday, 2020

“Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, ‘Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?’ 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’” (Rev. 7:13-14).

My mom has been contending with a family of beavers. You see, there’s a creek that runs underneath her driveway. Three culverts, each 6 feet in diameter, are there for the water to pass through, but that’s precisely where the beavers have set up shop. They’ve been plugging those culverts with small trees, corn stalks, twigs, stones, mud. They’re very good at it. The water, unable to pass through, has been rising and backing up which in turn, is undermining the driveway that leads back to mom’s house. One big rain and she will be socially distanced in a permanent way. So, my brothers and I have been trying to unplug and flush those culverts, but those busy beavers have been undoing our work faster than we can undo theirs.

Beavers have their waterproof pelts. My bothers have water-proof waders. I have a pair of old sneakers and jeans. The water, about chest high, is cold. And it’s muddy. And the dams are also packed tight and deep with mud, and by the time we step out of the creek we looked like we were made of the wet dust of the earth. The hot shower in mom’s house felt so good, and the warm, soft, clean fleecy things I put on also felt so good. The hot meal mom served tasted so good. And to be with family again during these spartan days was a delight.

Maybe heaven will be something like that. On earth sin has a way of making a mess of things and sin has a way of making a mess of us. But then we are washed; we are cleansed. We are given new clothing to wear and are invited to sit at table with those we love. It will feel like such a relief, like waking up from a terrible nightmare.

On earth, we trudge around in the muck and we become mucky. I don’t know how White Egrets do it. They plod around in the muddy shallows and still come out snow white. We are not like them. We become so easily entangled and soiled by sin. We cannot get near one another without befouling one another.

Some Christians have tried to avoid it all by isolating themselves in cloisters and monasteries and taking vows of silence or by living alone in the desert. It never works. If not by the devil and the world, we become muddied and unclean by our own sinful thoughts.

John’s vision of heaven is the opposite of all that. No one at that party is wearing old jeans and a dirty t-shirt. No one is soiled. No one is alone. No one is silent. They’ve been washed. They’ve been cleansed. They’ve been given bright, new, white robes to wear, and are praising God for all their worth.

“One of the elders asked me, ‘These in white robes—who are they? ‘Sir, you know.’ “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.” That’s a fancy way of saying it’s everyone who has

ever sinned or ever done evil, but then God forgave them because Jesus died for them on the cross. Is that you? I think so. We will not get to heaven on our own steam. It's the blood of the Lamb that washes us clean of sin and prepares us to be there. We are given the white robes to wear. We've been given his righteousness and innocence. It belongs to us even now.

Remember how in Isaiah the Lord tried to convince His people that repentance was worth it? "Come now, let us reason together" he says. "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow." The kind of white that makes you reach for your sunglasses on a sunny day after a fresh snowfall. The white light of lightening in the night. The white of a white egret against a green background. The kind of white that was used to describe our Lord's clothing at His transfiguration. Mark says, "his clothes became radiant, intensely white" (9:3). And at his resurrection, Matthew says his clothing was as white as snow (28:3). Our clothing will be like that too, because of His cleansing blood.

So, a big change is coming our way. Paul speaks of it in 1 Corinthians 15, "We shall not all sleep, but we shall be changed. In a flash, in the twinkling of any eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality" (v. 51). This transformation is a gift, not a reward. Paul wants to make sure we know that, so he concludes with these words, "Thanks be to God who gives us this victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (v. 57).

We will be changed. Philippians 3, "Our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly bodies to be like His glorious body" (v. 21). We will become more like Him. 1 John 3, "We know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is" (v. 2). Face to face, even while standing before the judgment seat of Christ, unafraid because of His forgiveness and grace.

Those saints of God wearing white robes, they didn't earn them by their piety or clean living or even by martyrdom. Some things cannot be purchased; those robes are given by grace to sinners. That's why that crowd is crying out, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne and to the Lamb!"

How different from what we currently know on earth. Though we are deeply flawed, He doesn't cancel us. He cancels our sin, by suffering its punishment himself and washing us with his blood to be white as snow.

One last thing: Sometimes we worry heaven will be dull, maybe in part because of passages like this one . . . standing around all day, a never-ending church service, wishing we were somewhere else. But on closer inspection, these people giving praise to God, they are not bored. They are ecstatic. They are celebrating. They've got their party clothes on, and they are doing with their palm branches what we do with flags and sparklers. They are so happy that they are shouting their praises. They don't want to be anywhere else. They don't want to be anywhere else. This is Jesus' victory celebration and it makes our parties look like child's play.

You won't be bored in heaven. The God who made you and redeemed you knows you well and knows what you love. He's a good gift giver, unique and thoughtful to the individual. You were made ultimately to be in His presence. That's what you were designed for . . . to enjoy His kingdom and to rejoice in His love. We will join our voices with the angels and those saints already there, those we have loved and lost, and we will praise Him who saved us by His death and resurrection and, at least in John's vision, gave us snow white robes to wear. Amen.