

MESSAGE: “Robes of Glory”

Text: Revelation 7:9-17

Purpose: the purpose of this message is to show how deeds of faith become robes of glory.

One of the fiercest debates that exploded from the pages of the Protestant Reformation is the tug-of-war between faith and works. To this day it fractures the unity of the Spirit. Is spiritual salvation a reward for a life well-lived and a job well done, or is spiritual salvation an unmerited gift dispensed by God to those who ask for it? Many of the reformers favored the latter quoting passages like Ephesians 2:8: “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast.” Those with an opposing view pointed to passages like Jesus’ parable of the sheep and goats in Mathew 25 where folks are judged on the basis of what they did or did not do for the least of God’s creatures. Martin Luther even advocated throwing the book of James out of the Bible completely because it dared to say, “faith without works is dead.”

For most of his early life, John Wesley, like many of us perhaps, tried to impress God with his faithful devotion and deeds of faith, but he did not truly feel the grace of God until May 24th, 1738 when, at a point of spiritual collapse, he heard a reading of Luther’s preface to the book of Romans. In that moment, his heart-trust in God caught up with his head-knowledge of God. In his words, “I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.”

Even as the Methodist journey came alive to God’s ‘amazing grace’ in Jesus Christ, it labored to live that out through deeds of faith, acts of compassion and social transformation. It was a faith with wheels—going someplace—doing something—making a difference in a broken and hurting world. Schools were built, universities established, wells dug, churches planted and hospitals opened. Salvation in Christ may be free, but the fruit of that awakening would find expression through acts of courage, compassion and vision that were costly indeed. The debate of ‘either/or’ is heresy; the expression of ‘both/and’ is biblical and life-giving. God’s grace is free, but God’s discipleship costs everything.

I believe the clarity of this distinction is necessary to understand this morning’s reading from Revelation 7. As God reveals to John, and through him to us, events on the horizon of tomorrow, God offers a kaleidoscope of images in heaven and on earth. One is of an international company of saints robed in glory worshipping God in the heavenly throne room and Holy of Holies.

Picture a scroll with content so consequential that it is sealed with seven seals. As each seal is broken, secrets known only to God are revealed. By chapter 7, six seals have been

broken and God is poised to intervene in human history. In the words preceding our text, 144,000 are 'sealed' from the twelve tribes of Israel. They are difficult to count, but they can be counted. *Sealing* was an early Christian term for baptism. Those who are sealed are marked by baptism, not just the outward sign as seen by a congregation, but by an inward grace that transforms the human heart in much the same way that John Wesley's was transformed. It is a change that cannot resist doing the works God requires, inspires and expects. It is a change that flows from a heart of genuine love, a change that will go the distance and make whatever sacrifice is required.

When we speak of veterans who made the ultimate sacrifice, or veterans who paid the ultimate price, we mean they surrendered their lives in service to their nation. They died so that we might live in freedom. We are so overcome by the depth of their sacrifice that we award them (often posthumously, though not always), a purple heart. It is a symbol of their heroic sacrifice. In Revelation 7, there is a similar symbol given and it is awarded to those who have also released their lives to God.

Read Revelation 7:9-17.

The first thing I ask you to notice is the scope of this international assembly. John's experience of church was of little bands of house-believers. Our experience may be a bit larger, but even to us a church of 144,000 seems like an unimaginably large number. Yet this assembly of God's people spans centuries, cultures and continents. It truly is a *multitude no one can count!*

The occasion of All Saints' Sunday, which we celebrate today, is one on which we are encouraged to see beyond the obvious congregation of those physically present. The United Methodist Church of Park Avenue, Auburn and the High Street Methodist Church and Methodist Episcopal Church that preceded it have witnessed multiple generations of congregation. We minister from the shoulders of saints who minister from the shoulders of other saints right on back to the founding of the church itself. When you expand this to embrace God's faithful throughout the world and throughout time, it quickly becomes a *multitude no one can count!*

This assembly, robed in white, with palm branch in hand, celebrates the victory of the Lamb, Jesus, who, by sacrificing his life at the cross, made salvation a reality. They fall on their faces in worship, singing a 7-fold song of praise: blessing, glory, wisdom, thanksgiving, honor, power and might! No fuller expression of praise can be made! And then the question is asked by an elder, "Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?"

John does not know the answer, but he quickly finds out, “These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.” Obviously, the picture is not a literal one. Robes washed in blood are anything but white, so what is being said here?

The robe is the purple heart; or more precisely, the robe is that which the purple heart represents: the releasing of one’s life to God—in deeds of faith, acts of courage and extraordinary sacrifice. To be frank, many are martyrs. Everything was lost, or more accurately won, for the victory of God’s life-giving Son. The robe of glory worn by the saint of God shines with the fruit of the Spirit of God, perfect love worn as a robe of righteousness, not in place of faith, but because of faith!

I cannot say it any better than Paul in Colossians 3: “As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience. Bear with one another, and forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you must also forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.” When you put on this robe, you put on Christ himself.