

“Who are they?”

Who are these folks – and where did they come from? That’s the question God’s Word sets before us today – and it is a question that we could ask about these folks sitting in the pews here this morning.

Looking up and down the pews you might not think there is much “diversity” – but notice people of all ages – men and women – from at least 9 different cities – and youth from about that many different school districts. And then consider the numerous jobs, skills and abilities.

So much diversity, and yet, so much in common. For the most part we are a gathering of Christians – those who are baptized into Christ Jesus. On any given Sunday there may be those who do not know Jesus Christ, who do not believe in Him – but we are glad they too are here for the Divine Service and we pray that the Lord would gather them into His family as our brothers and sisters.

Now, if you asked the world, if you asked our neighbors here in Eagle – who would they say are these folks sitting in the pews? “Hypocrites”? “Do-gooders”? “Weird, cultish type people who are exclusive, especially when it comes to the Lord’s Supper”? “Naïve, weak people, who need the crutch of religion to get through life”?

“Who are these” people, John is asked – this great multitude that is standing before the throne and before the Lamb – clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands – crying out with a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!”

Who are they? And the answer, “you know.” The answer is obvious – and yet – so many don’t know who this great multitude is. Could it be that – what should be obvious, is not – because we are looking for something else?

Like the disciples who struggled to grasp that Jesus must be crucified – that that is what it means for Him to be the Christ – because they were looking for a different kind of Savior.

We see this multitude and hear the wonderful promise – and we think that these are the folks that will be with Jesus in heaven one day. “He who sits on the throne will shelter them with His presence. They shall hunger no more, neither shall they thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and He will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

Oh how WE long for such things! We can't wait to go to heaven. But wait! The Lamb who sits on the throne shepherds you NOW. Already the Lord shelters you with His presence.

Yes, this great multitude is a picture of those who are in heaven with Christ – but it is also a picture of ALL who are in Christ – including you, who are united to Christ by faith. This great multitude includes all believers – in heaven and on earth.

That's why Jesus says that you are in the world, but not of the world. When Jesus prayed to the Father – He didn't ask that you be taken out of the world – but that the Father would keep you from the evil one, that He would shelter you with His presence.

“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.” These are the sheep that the Good Shepherd has gathered into His flock – disciples that Jesus has called to “follow me” – believers who are cleansed by His blood, and clothed with His righteousness.

These are the saints of God – that's you, who believe and are made holy – who are before the throne of God and serve Him day and night in His temple; and He who sits on the throne will shelter them with His presence.”

What troubles you? What are your tribulations? What brings tears to your eyes? The death of a loved one? The fear of your own death? Jesus, the Good Shepherd, leads you through death and the grave to life everlasting – and even now, leads you beside the still waters of Holy Baptism. In Baptism, death has no power over you – for Christ's resurrection is your resurrection!

Have you wandered away from God, like a lost sheep – turning your back on the Shepherd and scampering off after the things of this world? Have you gorged yourself with all the world has to offer – a deviant lifestyle, wild living, immediate gratification and excess of every kind – and yet, you're not satisfied? Are you like the prodigal son who tasted all that the world served up – but are left in the muck and mire, hungry and thirsty?

Jesus, the Good Shepherd, makes you to lie down in the green pastures of His Word – a Word full of grace that is sufficient for you. He prepares a table before you in the presence of your enemies – satisfying your hunger and thirst with His forgiveness of all your sin – protecting you from all evil with His resurrected Body and Blood.

What beats down on you like the scorching sun? Is it a past sin that weighs so heavily – or a fresh one that stings so deeply? Jesus, the Good Shepherd, anoints your head with oil – anointing you with the Holy Spirit who directs you to Jesus and His blood shed for you – to His wounds, by which you are healed.

These clothed in white robes – who are they, and where did they come from? You know – they are YOU. You who come from all different backgrounds, experiences, and places – you who are gathered together with the whole Christian Church – a great multitude that no one can count – you who stand here, before the throne and before Jesus, “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.”

From out of all your tribulations (whatever they might be) – the Good Shepherd leads you here, to these springs of living water – showering you with His forgiveness and peace – that your soul may be restored, and every tear wiped from your eyes.

Come to the green pastures and the quiet waters. For even now Jesus is shepherding you – through this world, to your eternal home in heaven. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.