

Year C-Easter4-2019-A Lamb Turns into a Shepherd

May 12th, 2019

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Revelation 7:9-17

A Lamb Turns into a Shepherd!

“After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne.” Were they before the throne of judgement? Absolutely not, they were before the throne of blessing. They were a great multitude, not just a multitude but a great multitude. I am thinking that just about everyone who ever lived was there, maybe everyone and that’s why no one could count them.

I hope you don’t think this silly but I have some more questions to ask. Are the Rohingya’s there? They are that Muslim minority in Myanmar that the Buddhist majority decided to scapegoat. Their military went in, burned their villages and shot their men, killing thousands. It was driven by internal politics and resulted in needless sacrifice of human life. The 655,000, who could, escaped to Bangladesh where they live in refugee camps.

Those that were shot, are they among the great multitude that no one could count? How about those who died due to lack of medical treatment or starvation; do we count them? The text does say the great multitude is from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages. It doesn’t say they were Christian, or that there were any language requirements.

How about the Lakota Sioux killed at the so called “Battle of Wounded Knee” on December 29th in 1890 in South Dakota or Custer’s men who died at the so called, “Custer’s last stand” in June of 1876 in southern Montana. Yes, I will bet they are there. Oh, I know, all of this occurred since John had his vision but use your imagination. This is precisely the kind of thing John’s vision refers to.

So let’s finish the sentence I so rudely interrupted. All of these people were, “standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white.” Can you picture them? Dark skin with beautiful black eyes surrounded by the whites of their eyes, framed in white; blue eyed and green eyed blonds with light skin and freckles peering out from their pure white robes, young faces and old faces, men’s faces and women’s faces; souls, each one and all doing the same

thing—waving palm branches and crying out in loud, exuberant voices, “Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!”

Salvation belongs to our God; not violence, not political jousting, not promises that turn to disappointment, not salvation belongs to those having all the things they think they must have, and not us vs them dichotomies where we count because they don’t. There are no dichotomies in this crowd. All of them are saying the same thing. And it isn’t just God who sits on the throne that they are praising, it’s the Lamb! The Lamb allowed himself to become “the Lamb slaughtered that still stands” to show us his love and forgiveness and to show us why it is that we have made our world so hellish and that we now threaten planet earth, the mother who nurtures us all. And what better day to mention mother earth than Mother’s Day!

But it wasn’t just the victims of history who were celebrating that day in John’s vision. No, “all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God.” James Alison thinks angels are expressions of God’s imagination that God made into beings that share the universe with him. At any rate they have fallen on their faces and are worshiping God. In this humble and adoring posture they together sing, “Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to God forever and ever! Amen.”

They can’t find words big enough and expressive enough to say what their hearts feel. Along with the multitudes beyond count, the elders and the four living creatures bow in praise, their bodies all in the same position, pointing toward the throne. They are united in gratitude and thanksgiving. There is no fear anywhere. Whisk away all delusion, obfuscation, lies, and arrogance and this is what emerges as real.

Now we step back from the biggest of big pictures and our focus shifts to the personal, relational and intimate. “Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, ‘Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?’” It’s like being addressed by some wise grandfather and you are young and inexperienced. Why is he asking me this? What does he expect me to say? What if I get it wrong? To his credit the character quarried in John’s vision maintains his integrity. “I said to him, ‘Sir, you are the one that knows.’” Good answer! It was a rhetorical question. We can tell by what the elder says next.

“Then he said to me, ‘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.’” “Great ordeal”, what is the elder talking about? Maybe he is talking about contemporary life. Sometimes I feel we are going through some great ordeal. The weather is changing and becoming more unpredictable, all these random shootings—should we have guards at our church, are our schools sufficiently secure, and politics are becoming ever more polarized. While we talk about there being no us

vs them, in many places the flames of “us and them” division are being fanned. These people from every tribe and language seemed to have gone through this and come out the other side. They now wear white robes, wave palm branches and shout in praise of God with vigorous joy.

How is it that their robes are so white? The answer is another mind-bending, image mixing scene that trips us into thinking new thoughts. Their robes have been washed in the blood of the Lamb. What do robes washed in blood ordinarily look like? They are not dazzling white. Could it be that their robes were all stained with the blood of each other? They have come out of the ordeal but not unscathed. They are covered in blood no matter if it is the blood of Wounded Knee or the blood of Custer’s last stand. All have sinned and come short of the glory of God. And so every one of them washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. They accepted their need for ongoing forgiveness, they lived in forgiveness, and now they lived through the forgiving blood of the Lamb.

John’s vision goes on, “For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them.” I had always pictured those who went through the great ordeal as the pure ones who somehow made it through or those killed by the great ordeal who finds themselves resurrected with life beyond that. But close analysis of the text is forcing me to change my view. We all go through the great ordeal and all of us come out of it with blood stained garments but we can wash our robes in the forgiving blood of the Lamb who makes our robes white. The Lamb’s blood cleanses because it is innocent blood and from God.

“The one on the throne shelters them. They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat.” Talk about a mother’s day dream for her children! Isn’t this what every mother wants?

Finally, we have one last jolt to our standard thinking. “The Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.” Lambs don’t ordinarily become shepherds but this one does. Lambs are not usually considered reliable guides to anything, much less guides to the springs of the water of life, but this one is. There must be something different about this Lamb. Maybe it’s that he is the slain Lamb standing and maybe it’s that our blood-stained robes are made white in his blood. Thanks be to God. Amen.