

SERMON TITLE: "Robed in White"
SERMON TEXT: Revelation 7:9-17
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: May 22, 2022, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

Due to current events in the news about the abortion debate, it's quite likely that you've had a recent thought or two about the U.S. Supreme Court. If you're like me, you picture them in your mind as nine justices dressed in black robes. If you're up to speed on those folks, you know that the U.S. Supreme Court currently consists of six men and three women. Of the nine, one is African American and one is Hispanic. Geographically, only two of the nine come from states west of the Mississippi. In regard to religious affiliation, two are Jewish, six are Catholic, and one is Episcopalian. After Justice Stephen Breyer retires in June, and Justice Ketanji Jackson fills his spot, there will be four women, two African Americans, and two Protestants. It isn't only the Senate Judiciary Committee that is interested in the background of these nine important people. Because their experiences influence their view of the law, and because their rulings determine so much about our American lives, it helps us to know something about who these persons are.

Now I want you to make a mental shift. Go from nine people wearing black robes to a great heavenly multitude dressed in white robes. According to Revelation 7:13, it isn't a lawyer or politician who poses the heavenly question, but an elder who asks, "Who are they, and where did they come from?" Let's take a closer look at Revelation 7 and see if we can find an answer. Who are these people robed in white?

1—EVERY TYPE OF PEOPLE

The first characteristic we notice about these folks robed in white is that they come from every type of people. Their clothes might be all white, but their skin certainly isn't. Revelation 7:9 tells us that they come from every nation, every tribe, and every language. From that diversity we can deduce that

these persons who reach God's heavenly throne are from every socioeconomic group, every gender, and every age. They are people of every persuasion and every sexual orientation. Those who make it to heaven will be from every kind of life situation. They will be drawn from every corner of the earth.

This description of who will be in heaven wearing white robes causes me to think about our United Methodist Judicial Council, which is to the United Methodist denomination what the Supreme Court is to our country. The United Methodist Judicial Council has nine members from around the world. Those faithful United Methodists serve our church by making decisions about our governance and rules. And they do that from very diverse backgrounds. One is a woman lawyer from Mozambique. One is a male district superintendent from Norway. One is a male judge who served on the supreme court of the Philippines. One is a woman from Kansas who was a U.S. Circuit Court judge. One is a male lawyer who was born in Vietnam and specializes in international human rights. One is a male African American pastor from New Jersey. One is a white female lawyer from New York, and one is a black male lawyer from Liberia.

Those nine United Methodist Judicial Council members give us a sense of the diversity of heaven, where there will be a rainbow spectrum of colors, customs, and perspectives. When we cross over to the other side, we'll be surprised at how many different kinds of people will be included. According to Revelation 7, those in white robes will include some from every type of people.

2—THOSE WHO PRAISE & WORSHIP GOD

A second trait we notice about the people robed in white is that they are those who praise and worship God. The multitude gathered around the heavenly throne will be those who enjoy expressing their love for God. The book of Revelation indicates that heaven will be a place of rejoicing and adoration. Those who stand before God will be people who are experienced at lifting their voices and their hearts. Chapter seven, verse nine, says that they will be waving palm branches. That's a sign of

victory. These white-robed worshipers will be a happy lot, because they will be believers in God's power and glory and wisdom. They'll be eager to sing about God's amazing grace and wondrous salvation.

There are some people who think that heaven will be a family reunion or a place to enjoy their favorite recreation. Some biblical images of heaven give the idea of a never-ending feast. Maybe heaven will include those activities and benefits. But, for sure, the one thing heaven has to include is worship. And I have a hunch that the more that people have practiced and enjoyed praising God in this life, the more likely they'll be found praising God in the life to come. The people in white robes will be those who want to praise and worship God.

3—THOSE WHO'VE COME OUT OF THE GREAT ORDEAL

According to verse 14, a third characteristic of the people robed in white is that they are those who've come out of the great ordeal. They are now on the other side of a great tribulation. At the time the book of Revelation was written, there was a lot of persecution of Christians. So the author was probably thinking about that extremely trying time, in which Christians sometimes died for their faith.

Fortunately, in the United States today, it would be very unusual for anyone to kill us because we are Christian. But even we face trials and temptations. As we go through our life, we come up against challenges that force us to choose. Will we be faithful to God, or will we buckle under pressure? Do we stay true to our faith, and do what Jesus would do, or do we give in to the wrong because that's easier?

You know what I'm talking about. Being honest. Being generous. Being thankful. Being kind. Going out of your way to help someone. Standing up for the oppressed. Putting God before everyone and everything else. Carrying your own share of the load and a little more. Offering forgiveness. All those good ways of behaving require some measure of sacrifice. They require us to subject ourselves to a voluntary tribulation.

Or maybe the great ordeal we experience isn't of our own choosing. We have health problems or family problems that have been foisted upon us. Maybe there's trouble at work that we can do nothing about, except live through the anxiety. But, even then, we have the choice of giving in to the negativity and allowing ourselves to wallow in faithless despair—or, we can make the best of those difficult situations by leaning on God for help.

Maybe making the best of a bad situation is what it means, in part, to wash our robes clean and white in the blood of the Lamb. Jesus' execution on the cross was a terrible act of injustice. But once Jesus' blood was shed, Christians made the best of it by claiming the tribulation that happened to Jesus as an act of salvation from God. Just as the horrific ordeal of the cross was redeemed by God's power of resurrection on Easter morning, so too is God's renewing and refreshing power available to us who choose to believe. No matter how messy or painful our lives have been, we who put our trust in Christ are able to find cleansing and redemption too. The people dressed in white robes are those who've come out of the great ordeal.

4—THOSE WHO FIND COMFORT IN GOD

A fourth characteristic of the people robed in white is that they find comfort in God. This is the heavenly reward of which we all hope and dream. This is the promise of eternal life that brings courage to our fainting hearts. This is the future assurance that makes the troubles of this life bearable.

Revelation 7:15-17 tells us that those in white robes are well cared for. God's temple provides shelter from the sun and scorching heat. Never again will these faithful ones suffer from hunger. Nor will they be thirsty, because the Lamb will guide them like a shepherd to the water of life. God's care will be so sufficient that "God will wipe away every tear from their eyes." This is the vision of heavenly hope that gives us strength in sickness, stress, grief, and death. Those in white robes find comfort in God.

CONCLUSION

When I was about to be ordained, one of my happy tasks was purchasing a clergy robe. At that time, in 1990, it was popular for clergy to buy white robes. So that's what I did. But in previous years, it had been more common for clergy to purchase black robes.

So, when I was appointed as the associate pastor at the First United Methodist Church in Greeley, Colorado, the older senior minister had a black robe, and I had my white one. I never thought much about that until one day, when one of the teenagers asked me a question. She wanted to know if I wore a white robe because I was a woman, and Keith wore a black robe because he was a man—OR—if Keith wore a black robe because he was the senior minister, and I wore a white robe because I was the associate. No, I told her. The difference wasn't because of gender or status or job title. Nor did the color of our clergy robes have anything to do with who was the good gal or the bad guy. It all had to do with preference and style. And now, more and more clergy aren't wearing robes at all, and that's all about style and preference too.

But, no matter what we've been wearing in this life, when we get to heaven I guess we'll all be wearing the same thing. So, if anyone asks, "Who are these, and where did they come from?" we'll be able to answer. They are every type of people, who praise and worship God, who've come out of the great ordeal, and who find comfort in God. That's who will be robed in white.