

Sermon - 4th Sunday after Easter
May 12, 2019
Revelation 7:9-17
“Rank and File Christians”

In C. S. Lewis' allegory “*The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe*”, the adventure of finding Narnia, Lewis' idealization of earth and the Kingdom of God, begins in an old British manor house in an empty room that contains nothing but a wardrobe. Playing a game of hide n seek with her siblings, a young, impulsive girl named Lucy enters the room, then the wardrobe, which is filled with coats, mostly long fur coats – classy stuff. There was nothing little Lucy liked so much it seems as the feel of fur. She stepped into the wardrobe, got in among the coats and rubbed her face against them in sheer delight.

She found a second row of coats, of mink and wool, colors galore, and so kept walking, step by cautious but excited step. “*This must be an enormous wardrobe!*” she thought. Then she noticed that there was something crunching under her feet and she was rubbing her face, not against coats, but pine tree limbs. In a moment she was standing in the middle of a wood at night, snow under her feet and snowflakes gently falling through the air until she came to a lamppost.

Without realizing it, Lucy was in Narnia, just on the other side of the wardrobe. Lewis imagines a world just beyond this world, this wonderful, rational reality of ours – and while it's like our world in some respects it's an eternal world – entirely unlike ours. It's close to us, or we to it, so its wonders we can experience at least to a degree here and now. But final and full participation is a final and full “passage-way” away. Of this kingdom that is both here and far off, both now and not yet, Lewis borrowed from another great allegory - Revelation.

The writer of this story, the Apostle John, not unlike C.S. Lewis, wrote to encourage believers trying to hold their ground amid all sorts of threats to faith and faithful living. John writes to the church on earth, whose members struggle regularly and the church in heaven, whose members rejoice constantly. He writes of two worlds nonetheless with the presumption that people called “saints” belong to both. They live on earth, marred by sin and suffering and yet belong to “a new earth”, where full throated worship of Christ radiates from “*a great multitude which no one could number, from every tribe and every nation, every people and tongue, clothed in white, praising God saying salvation belongs to our God and to the Lamb.*”

When the church on earth mimics the one in heaven and worships, the worship of those “*clothed in white*” joins that of we who have not yet had our final fitting. When we sing, they sing to us, we whose days are often if not always changing, of things that never change. As John 10:28 puts it, their song tells us to “*listen to Christ...who promised you as he promised us that no one or nothing can take you from him.*”

These saints - every last one of them, were as we are now folks making their way through the wardrobe, delighted by what we have heard from Jesus – that nothing can take us away from him, even if we fumble our response to such love and are perplexed and even discouraged by what we see in life. We are folks who pastor and author Peter Marshall once referred to as “*saints of the rank and file.*” Sometimes ‘rank and file’ Christians suffer for their faith. Three weeks ago, on Easter, when taking home lilies or tulips after worship was our task saints in Sri Lanka gathered up and brought home their dead – as much of them as they could that is.

Revelation has them in mind, some might say exclusively so. Jesus had told John many times this sort of thing would happen. But Christians of the rank and file are simply folks who have heard the Shepherd's voice and follow it the best they can. Little wonder the Psalm writer rejoices in a Shepherd "*who leads me in the paths of righteousness for his names sake.*" But however we experience life what we experience pales in comparison to what we'll experience some day, so by default we too are in an "ordeal" of sorts.

Today, I would like to use as one example those who've served us as mothers. The word used in Revelation 7:15 and translated as "worship" means "*worshipful service.*" So today we might ask '*who are these women clothed in white?*' They were, are or will be women making their way through the wardrobe one delighted if uncertain step at a time worshipfully serving God and us as moms. They were, are or one day will be ladies who know the voice of their Good Shepherd and can pick the sound of their child's voice out of a crowded room not to mention even their slightest cries in the middle of the night!

In this 'worshipful service' they are often humbled but display humility, which Martin Luther once said is when a person "*doesn't even know they are being humble.*" Through the years they manage to listen to playground laments, prepubescent angst and '*mom, I'm on my own now*' pronouncements' because they have a Savior whose has spoken grace to them but also hears them when they pray. Mothering is not bad work – especially today, but it's neither a stretch nor a show of disrespect to place that calling under the heading of "ordeal" either.

When I was kid (which to my mom meant high school) she'd lay out my clothes every morning! Maybe she assumed I'd be relieved of one thing in the morning seeing them over the back of the recliner when I came down the stairs from my room – but I think she knew I resembled my dad in more ways than one and figured I'd make an utter mess of it! I didn't exactly see it as "worshipful service" in those days I suppose. Now I see that saints of the rank and file operate just like that – they worshipfully serve subtly in this life cause they heard a promise they'll do so supremely in the life to come.

I suppose in that regard we're all a bit like little Lucy of C.S. Lewis' imagination - making our way to Narnia enchanted by the feel of mink. Entering the Kingdom of God is only by grace of course – soft as it comes. But the saints of God who tiptoe through their ordeals we call our daily vocations know - nothing eclipses classic, timeless white. Who are these...you know. AMEN