

WASHED

Acts 9:36-43; Psalm 23; Revelation 7:9-17; John 10:22-30

A sermon preached by the Reverend Theodore S. Atkinson
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4th Sunday of Easter, May 6, 2001.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

It seems dreamlike, this vision, a vision of heaven given to John by the angel. John looked and saw a vision of God's final victory. He saw a great multitude, too many to number. That's John's way of saying "There's a wideness in God's mercy, like the wideness of the sea." The multitude is not only large, it's also diverse. From *every* nation, race, tribe, class, and language, an authentic rainbow coalition. In Dante's *The Divine Comedy* the first person to meet Dante at the gate of heaven is Statius, an ancient Roman. The baffling thing is that Statius was a pagan Roman who lived before Christ and had never been baptized, yet Dante places him as a greeter at the gates of heaven. Scholars have debated why Dante, a very orthodox and learned Christian, placed a pagan on his way to heaven. I believe it was because Dante had seen the vision of heaven in Revelation 7, "A great multitude from every nation." He knew "the love of God is broader than the measures of our mind."

Notice what the great multitude are doing - standing before the Lamb, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, the Lamb who is also our good Shepherd. They're waving palm branches, and singing.

*Salvation belongs to our God
who sits upon the throne and
to the Lamb.*

I imagine some of them sing ancient chants. Others sing a baroque style of music composed by Bach and Handel. Still others ~~sing~~ rap out the song and others sing peppy little contemporary 21st century praise choruses. *Salvation belongs to our God*, they sing. Meaning - those in heaven are there not because of what they did or failed to do; not because of what they believed or did not believe but only by the grace of God through the Lord Jesus Christ. In Christ's life of

compassion, his death on the cross, and his resurrection from the dead, we see how vast is God's love for the world -- a love that's ready to suffer for our sakes, yet so strong that nothing will prevail against it.

One of the elders asks John, "Who are these clothed in white robes and where have they come from?" John answers, "You tell me!" And he said, "These are they who are coming out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb." Wonderful, imaginative, metaphorical, poetic language pointing to our need for God to wash, forgive, and make us clean through Christ's death.

Today we baptize four children. We wash them in the waters of baptism. Baptism reminds us of how we are washed clean by the blood of Christ. In baptism, we place these children in the hands of Christ. No one will snatch them out of his hand. Today, Christ calls them by name. We will pray that as they grow they'll hear Christ's voice and follow him.

Although baptism has great significance for us -- baptism is not so necessary that we are lost without it. The drops of water on our head do not in themselves do what only God can do. But through the sacrament of baptism God really speaks and acts.

Often a story explains the meaning of baptism better than a logical discourse. C. S. Lewis, in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, gives a wonderfully imaginative picture of baptism. Eustace, a young teenage snob, accompanies his two cousins to the magical land of Narnia. Edmund and Lucy get along well but Eustace finds fault with everything and holds grudges against everybody. Their ship, the *Dawn Treader*, runs into a great storm and with their ship in ruins they land on *Dragon Island*. Here Eustace runs away, gets lost, and turns into a dragon yet with his human mind, a condition which teaches him how wickedly he had acted. He's

transformed back into a boy when Aslan the Lion, a Christ figure, tears off his dragon skin and throws him into a well of water. I'll let Eustace tell the story.

"I looked up and saw a huge lion coming slowly towards me. I was terribly afraid even though I was a dragon. The lion told me to follow him and I did. It led me to a garden and in the middle of the garden there was a well. You could see the water bubbling up from the bottom of it. It was a lot bigger than most wells, like a very big, round bath with marble steps going down into it. The water was as clear as anything and I thought if I could get in there and bathe it would ease my pain. But the lion told me I must undress first. Dragons are snaky sort of things and snakes can cast their skins. So I started scratching myself and my scales began coming off all over the place. And then I scratched a little deeper and, instead of just scales coming off here and there, my whole skin started peeling off beautifully, like it does after an illness, or as if I was a banana. In a minute or two I just stepped out of it. I could see it lying there beside me, looking rather nasty. It was a most lovely feeling. So I started to go down into the well for a bath. But just as I was going to put my foot into the water I looked down and saw that it was all hard and rough and wrinkled and scaly just as it had been before. So I scratched and tore again and this under skin peeled off beautifully and out I stepped and left it lying beside the other one and went down to the well for my bath. Well, exactly the same thing happened again. And I thought to myself, oh dear, how ever many skins have I got to take off? For I was longing to wash. So I scratched away for the third time and got off a third skin, just like the two others, and stepped out of it. But as soon as I looked at myself in the water I knew it had been no good. Then the lion said, 'You will have to let me undress you. I was afraid of his claws but I was pretty nearly desperate now. So I just lay flat down on my back to let him do it. The very first tear he made was so deep that I thought it had gone right into my heart. And when he began pulling the skin

off, it hurt worse than anything I've ever felt. The only thing that made me able to bear it was just the pleasure of feeling the stuff peel off. You know -- if you've every picked the scab off a sore place. It hurts but it is such fun to see it coming away. Well, the lion peeled the beastly stuff right off just as I thought I'd done it myself the other three times, only they hadn't hurt -- and there it was lying on the grass; only ever so much thicker, and darker, and more knobby looking than the others had been. And there I was as smooth and soft as a peeled switch and smaller than I had been. Then he caught hold of me and threw me into the water. It smarted like anything but only for a moment. After that it became perfectly delicious and as soon as I started swimming and splashing I found that all the pain had gone. And then I saw why. I'd turned into a boy again. After a bit the lion took me out and dressed me" in a white robe.

Baptism is not simply a quaint old custom. Baptism is a sign of God's love for us sinners. A sign that we can't be saved by our education and intelligence, our morality and hard work, or anything else. Baptism is a sign that "Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!" Baptism raises for us the question asked in the old gospel song with its mystical metaphorical allusions. *Have you been to Jesus for the cleansing power? Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb? Are you fully trusting in His grace this hour? Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb? Are you washed in the blood, In the soul-cleansing blood of the Lamb? Are your garments spotless? Are they white as snow? Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?*

Let us pray: Bloody Lord, you are just too real. Blood is sticky, repulsive, frightening. We do not want to be stuck with a sacrificial God who bleeds. We want a spiritual faith about spiritual things, things bloodless and abstract. We want sacrificial spirits, not sacrificed bodies. But you have bloodied us with your people Israel and your Son, Jesus. We fear that by being Jesus' people we too might have to bleed with others and for others. If such is our destiny, we pray that your will, not ours, be done. Amen.