

St. Luke's Evangelical Lutheran Church
Pastor Mark Gartner
Sermon for Confirmation – May 4th, 2008

Revelation 7:9-17

“After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: “Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.”

All the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying: “Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God forever and ever. Amen!”

Then one of the elders asked me, “These in white robes—who are they, and where did they come from?” I answered, “Sir, you know.” And he said, “These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore, “they are before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will spread his tent over them. Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat upon them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

In the name of Jesus Christ, dear friends, family, parents, and especially you, St. Luke's confirmation class of 2008:

Do you know what today is? Can any of you tell me anything historic that happened on May 4th? If not, allow me to refresh your memories. On this date in 1970, 4 students were killed and 9 wounded in the Kent State shootings by the Ohio National Guard. There were a couple of firsts on this date in history. 29 years ago Margaret Thatcher becomes the 1st woman Prime Minister of England. In the year 1897 the 1st Boston Marathon was run, and in 1871 the first professional baseball game was played. And to top it off, in the year 1975 on May 4th Moe Howard died who we might better know as the famous Moe of the Larry, Moe and Curly -- Three Stooges fame.

What do these seemingly unrelated events have in common (besides the fact that they all happened before you, the confirmands, were born)? As newsworthy as these events were at the time, they have largely been forgotten. And even if you were able to remember some of the events I mentioned, I doubt that you remembered when they happened. May 4th is not among the most important dates in American history. It doesn't rank up there with July 4, 1776 (the adoption of the Declaration of Independence) or June 6, 1944 (D-day). But this date, May 4th, 2008, is extremely significant to you each of you personally. Today is the day you have been preparing for for your entire Christian lives. This is the day when you will publicly declare your undying allegiance to your Savior. This is the day when you will kneel at the Lord's altar. Today is your Confirmation Day. This is a day God wants you to remember. This is a day I never want you to forget.

Theme: Remember Your Confirmation Day!

- 1. This is a day of anticipation**
- 2. This is a day of celebration**

The man who wrote the words of our text was not familiar with the rite of confirmation. The apostle John lived in the first century AD. When he lived, there was no Lutheran Church. When John wrote the book of Revelation, he was all alone in exile on the island of Patmos. But even though John didn't know anything about confirmation, it is amazing how much this day and this text have in common. In both cases people are wearing white robes. In both cases people are worshipping God. In both cases believers are publicly confessing their faith in God. At first these two events appear to be very similar, but a closer look reveals that they are not exactly the same.

By my count there are 29 young men and women wearing white robes in this sanctuary. You don't look exactly the same, but you look more alike than different. You share a common language. Most of you go to the same school and live in the same general area of Watertown. But the white robed multitude in John's vision numbers far more than 29. In fact, there are so many people standing before God's throne that John can't count them. He can't see them all, but he can see that they are all different. They come from **“every nation, tribe, people and language”**.

The people who have gathered here today have come to worship God. We pray to him. We sing his praises. We lift up our voices to thank him for everything he has done for us. But there is no throne up here. There is no Lamb up here. And I don't see anyone waving palm branches in the air. That is precisely what John sees. In his vision John sees a sea of white with waving flashes of green. He sees angels and elders and living creatures bowing and worshipping and praising God. He sees a rainbow circled throne and a living Lamb who was slain.

In just a few minutes the confirmands will stand and make a public declaration of their faith. They will reaffirm the faith that was created in their hearts on the day of their baptism. They will confess their faith in the triune God. They will confess that they believe the Bible to be the inspired Word of God. They will pledge to live up to their confirmation vows no matter what the cost. Even though the confirmands have done everything that was asked of them, even though I have no reason to doubt the conviction behind each of their confessions, my experience tells me that they might sound a little less than enthusiastic. Not because their confession is insincere, but because they will probably be a little nervous, because they will be standing in front of a church full of people, because they (like most teenagers) aren't seeking out opportunities to speak in public.

And it's not just these young people either. It is a blessing to be able to join together and confess our common faith (like we do when we recite the Apostles' or Nicene Creeds). It is a small foretaste of heaven whenever we come together and express with our voices what we believe in our hearts, but our feeble words don't even come close to the powerful confession John heard in his vision. The white robed multitude cried out in a loud voice: **“Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb”**. And then the angels and the elders and the living creatures responded with a bold confession of their own: **“Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen”**!

Today is a beautiful day, a glorious day. I hope this day ranks right up there as one of the best days of your young lives, but I also want to remember that the best is yet to come. As wonderful as your confirmation day is, it anticipates a better day, the day when you will be given your own permanent white robe, the day when you will take your place among God's saints and angels in heaven. What will happen on the Last day is what makes this day a day of celebration.

2. This is a day of celebration

I know that many of you are planning to celebrate today. I have a handful of invitations to prove it. This afternoon will be filled with parties and presents. This is a day for family and friends and food, maybe even a special cake to mark the occasion. As you go to your various celebrations, I want you to remember why you are celebrating. You are NOT celebrating a rite of passage this morning. This isn't the day when Christian girls and boys become Christian women and men. The purpose of this occasion is much more important than that. What you are doing here goes much deeper than that.

You are wearing gowns today, but you are NOT celebrating the equivalent of your Christian graduation. In catechism class I have seen each of you grow in faith and knowledge, but you don't know all there is to know about the Bible. There will always be more to learn. There will always be room to grow. Confirmation is not the end of your faith journey. This is only the beginning.

Finally, we are NOT gathered here today to celebrate your accomplishments. You have successfully completed two years of catechism. You can recite the Ten Commandments from memory. You can explain the way to heaven through Jesus and tell me what the Lord's Supper and Baptism are. You can tell me the steps of Jesus' humiliation and exaltation. You have worked hard. You have earned the right to be here today, right? Wrong! If you think that you have a right to be here, then I haven't done a very good job as your teacher. If you think that God owes you something, then you don't know your Bibles very well. The only thing God owes us is eternal punishment because we are sinful creatures. We were born in sin. We sin when we do what God forbids. We sin when we fail to do what God commands. And the hard earned wages for our sin is death.

Salvation is not something a person earns. Salvation is a gift. Faith isn't a decision a person makes. Faith is a miracle. It doesn't matter how much Bible knowledge we have stored up here. It doesn't matter if we can recite the entire Bible word-for-word from Genesis to Revelation. What really matters is in here – in your heart. The Holy Spirit has given us the miraculous gift of faith. We believe in Jesus. We believe that Jesus is our Savior. And that is something that is definitely worth celebrating.

We celebrate today because of our white robes. I'm not referring to the gowns that you just purchased. I'm talking about the robes John saw in his vision, the robes of righteousness that belong to all believers, the robes that have been washed and made white in the blood of the Lamb. Blood stains are notoriously difficult to get out, but the blood of Jesus has removed the most permanent stain there is. Jesus shed his blood on the cross to take away your sins. Every spot has been removed. Every blemish has been cleansed. Because of Jesus you are pure and clean and holy in the eyes of God.

We celebrate today because the Good Shepherd is our Shepherd. Jesus knows each one of us by name. He protects us. He provides for us. He loves us and leads us. What does this mean for his sheep? It means that we are safe. It means that we have peace. It means that we have nothing to fear. And that is an especially comforting thought considering that the world isn't a Christian-friendly place. Soon you will leave the safety of this sanctuary, and the devil will be waiting for you outside. He will try to make you break the promises you will make today. He will try to make you forget everything you have learned. He will try to convince you that you don't need God in your life. He will try to get you to believe that you can do whatever you want.

And sometimes he will succeed. Sometimes you will listen to Satan's lies. Sometimes you will give in to his temptation. And when you do, the Good Shepherd will be there to pick up the pieces. When his sheep stray, he goes after them. When his sheep come back to the fold, he welcomes them with open arms. We celebrate today because the Good Shepherd has given you everything you need to live up to your

confirmation vows. The One who leads you beside quiet waters has made you his own in the waters of Baptism. The One who makes your cup run over gives you his body and blood for forgiveness in Holy Communion. The One who said **“Surely I am with you always” (Matthew 28:20)** is always as close as your Bible. The One who said **“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened” (Matthew 11:28)** encourages you to go to him in prayer.

You might forget some of the things that you learned in catechism class. You might forget many of the Bible passages you memorized. It's possible that you might even forget the special verse you chose for your confirmation. Even if you forget everything else, even if you forget everything I said today, don't forget this day. Remember your Confirmation Day! Remember the eternal glory this day anticipates! Remember the eternal blessings this day celebrates! Amen.