

Revelation 7:9–17

⁹After 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 and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. ¹⁰They cried out in a loud voice, saying,

"Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!"

¹¹And 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, ¹²singing,

"Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom
and thanksgiving and honor
and power and might
be to our God forever and ever! Amen."

¹³Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?" ¹⁴I said to him, "Sir, you are the one that knows." 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.

¹⁵For 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.

¹⁶They will hunger no more, and thirst no more;
the sun will not strike them,
nor any scorching heat;

¹⁷for 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."

John 10:22–30

²²At that time the festival of the Dedication took place in Jerusalem. It was winter, ²³and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the portico of Solomon. ²⁴So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly." ²⁵Jesus answered, "I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name testify to me; ²⁶but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. ²⁷My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. ²⁸I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. ²⁹What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father's hand. ³⁰The Father and I are one."

...The “Game” of Thrones? In the great and now long drama that comprises God’s acts to save and deliver the children of the Lord, we have today come together during the...*intermission* that falls between two great acts of this unfolding drama. Ours is the “inter-mission,” the mission between two great acts of God. And each of those acts is actually itself a mission: there’s the mission – the sending – of Jesus to Jerusalem in Act One, and then the mission – the sending – of the New Jerusalem to this troubled world in the Second and Final Act. But right now is the intermission, when we have been sent out in the Gospel mission that falls between the sending of Jesus and the sending of the New Jerusalem. Welcome to the “inter-mission”!

I hope you found Act One to be engaging...because you were supposed to be drawn into its drama. The scene, as you heard from John's gospel, is the Temple in Jerusalem during the festival of the Dedication, or "Hanukkah" as we know it. Jesus is walking through the Temple grounds along the Portico of Solomon. Now that portico might have provided the best shelter from winter winds; but that columned portico was also where the anointed kings of Judah would publicly pronounce their judgments on matters of justice and national policy. It was interesting that Jesus was walking there, wasn't it? You know, no king of Israel or Judah was really crowned. No, to assume office, they were all anointed with special oil. The kings of Judah were the anointed ones; and that's what "messiah" literally means: "the anointed One." So that Portico of Solomon becomes quite an appropriate place for Jesus to be confronted with, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are *the Messiah*, tell us plainly."

I hope you realize that John's gospel is very deftly drawing us into a drama that some might call *The Game of Thrones* as they think of the much-hyped HBO series some of you may have seen or heard about. But this is no "game" of thrones; it is a very real contest, if not conflict between "thrones" – between two ways of rule and ruling. And Jesus, his disciples, you, and I – we are all caught up in this contest of thrones, which is still being played out this very day, in which the stakes are high and deadly, and for which cunning powers deploy operatives and commit acts of terror or "shock and awe". By walking in the Portico of Solomon, Jesus has entered the tense and volatile *Realpolitik* that still characterizes the contest of thrones in our day. Act One and Jesus' mission close with a question of sorts: "What's it going to be, Caesar or Christ, Empire of Power or Kingdom of God?" Which throne is going to rule this world and your life?

So welcome to the inter-mission! Only, this is not the time for refreshments and potty-breaks. This is the time for our mission between the sending of Jesus to Jerusalem and the sending of the New Jerusalem to a doomed world. Our inter-mission is not an easy time. We must live in a world where thrones, ways, and powers of rule not only clash with Christ, but also with each other. ...A world where bombs really go off to maim and kill the innocent, where armies are really deployed and soldiers and civilians die, where poverty really dooms lives and dreams, where the plight of millions is forgotten for the chance to idolize the superficial gone viral. Welcome to this inter-mission in which we have to figure out how to live during and through this very real contest between thrones.

The stakes are high, and real, and deadly. "If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly." ...Which Jesus refuses to do. Jesus believes his wondrous works speak for themselves. But these folks will never get it "because you do not belong to my *sheep*." Now isn't that strange? In this very cosmopolitan setting of grand Temple architecture and sophisticated cleanliness procedures, Jesus starts talking about sheep – dirty, smelly, often matted, and pretty dumb sheep...that might be on rustic hills and herded by hick shepherds, but on the Temple mount? No. The only sheep you'd find on the Temple mount would be those properly prepared for...sacrifice.

But there's one thing about those messy, dumb sheep. In the din of all their world's alarms, offers, and calls, they have this absolutely uncanny ability to pick out their shepherd's voice, and they will follow that voice alone. "My sheep hear my voice, and they follow *me*. ...And I give them eternal life!" The very sheep, who are such easy prey to the violence of predators who love to terrorize, and to the using of the religious who only want something they can sacrifice for themselves – these very sheep who would seem to have no chance in this relentless contest of cunning thrones, these very sheep are the ones given eternal life...because with Jesus none other than God almighty is their Good Shepherd! At least, that's what Jesus claims as Act One draws to a close, and as a cross closes in on Jesus.

So here we are, in the intermission. I wish I could tell you just when the Second and Final Act will begin, but I can't. And yet, another one of the Johannine works, Revelation, gives us a moving sketch of what will unfold in Act II as God sends the New Jerusalem to a doomed world, and as the contest of thrones is forever concluded. In the New Jerusalem, Revelation pictures a veritable sea of diverse people from all races, cultures, and places. It's the very humanity that the world powers have always sought to divide and conquer, dominate by power, and segregate into classes; but now it's humanity all together before a throne. And that innumerable number and sea of people are *standing* before the throne, not bowing, kneeling, scraping, or kowtowing – but *standing*...tall, proud, free, and shoulder to shoulder. The angels will fall on their faces, but not this host of humanity. The One seated on the throne wants to see them *standing* in all the worth and dignity accorded them by the Cross of Jesus. I want to be in that number!

This countless host of diverse people is nevertheless all clothed in white. ...Not the blue and the gray, not the green and the red, not wrapped in any flag or uniform of arrogant nationalism. All of that is past. They are all clothed in white...because this is humanity made pure and holy by the giving of a Life that has made all things good and right, a humanity that has at last cleansed itself from the awful stains of its wrongs and lies by washing itself in the very lifeblood of the Holy. And this innumerable multitude is waving palm branches. ...Not fists, guns, protest placards, campaign banners, or any flag of persistent arrogance, but only palm branches, so that each and everyone can participate in a wave that surges around the New Jerusalem and its throne: "Blessed is the One who's come at last in the name of the Lord!" I want to be in that number!

And the focus of all their joy, their freedom, their peace, their pride, and their unity is the One seated on the throne! And who is seated on this last and everlasting throne? Not a mighty warrior, not a rich potentate, not a commander in chief of nuclear missiles frightening beyond imagination ... No, it's a *lamb*! Can you believe it? Not an emperor, a President, a Chairman, a Pope, or an Ayatollah – but a Lamb! ...A Lamb who's been so vulnerable to the perils of this world's needs and passions. It's incredible. In the Final Act, God turns the world upside down...and downside up! On the throne is a Lamb who knows what it's like for sheep in this predatory world of cunning and danger – a Lamb who, rather

than becoming like a wolf, sacrificed its life, so that there would be a dying to the godless violence, the inhumane abuse, and the vain idolatry of all this self – a dying for all to share! Seated on the last and everlasting throne is the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of my world. I want to be in that number... “for 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.”

Revelation’s picture of the Final Act may still be a bit sketchy, but the message is clear enough. On that Temple Mount during a Hanukkah long ago, as the powers interrogated a possible messiah, it was really the Lamb of God walking there, and getting prepared for...sacrifice, so that from his dying God would raise the last and lasting throne for our living! And before we can be in that wondrous number, standing tall, free, proud, and shoulder to shoulder in joy and peace eternal, you and I must be in this difficult intermission. But we’ve heard our Shepherd’s voice and now know what we must proclaim and embody during this inter-mission. And the Way we proclaim must be the Way we follow...

The love that dignifies others will always sabotage the fear used to coerce others;

the guts to give will always thwart the muscle used to take;

the suffering of the innocent will always dash the comforts of the complicit;

the wounded servant of justice and freedom will always subvert the invincible master of control and manipulation;

and dying for the truth will always beat living a lie...

because on that last and everlasting throne

is Jesus, the *Lamb* of God.