

### **The Living God has put his seal on you**

*After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth to prevent any wind from blowing on the land or on the sea or on any tree. <sup>2</sup> Then I saw another angel coming up from the east, having the seal of the living God. He called out in a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to harm the land and the sea: <sup>3</sup> “Do not harm the land or the sea or the trees until we put a seal on the foreheads of the servants of our God.” <sup>4</sup> Then I heard the number of those who were sealed: 144,000 from all the tribes of Israel.*

*<sup>5</sup> From the tribe of Judah 12,000 were sealed,  
from the tribe of Reuben 12,000,  
from the tribe of Gad 12,000,  
<sup>6</sup> from the tribe of Asher 12,000,  
from the tribe of Naphtali 12,000,  
from the tribe of Manasseh 12,000,  
<sup>7</sup> from the tribe of Simeon 12,000,  
from the tribe of Levi 12,000,  
from the tribe of Issachar 12,000,  
<sup>8</sup> from the tribe of Zebulun 12,000,  
from the tribe of Joseph 12,000,  
from the tribe of Benjamin 12,000.*

Have you ever tried to describe the indescribable? Chris Collinsworth is a commentator for the National Football League. NBC hired Chris to follow the Summer Olympic Games in Beijing. When asked by Bob Costas about an event he had attended that day Chris exclaimed, “I need a thesaurus to describe how amazing this experience is!” I’m sure that’s how St. John felt as he stood wide-eyed and mouth gaping at the visions Jesus showed him concerning the future of the Church. How does one put into words pictures of the Last Day or of heaven itself; things that no one this side of earth, has ever seen before? This morning we will explore one of John’s revelations.

In chapter 7 John writes, **“I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth to prevent any wind from blowing on the land or on the sea or on any tree. <sup>2</sup> Then I saw another angel coming up from the east, having the seal of the living God. He called out in a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to harm the land and the sea: <sup>3</sup> “Do not harm the land or the sea or the trees until we put a seal on the foreheads of the servants of our God.”** We have to remember that when we interpret God’s Word, we allow Scripture to interpret itself. When something doesn’t make sense, we look first of all at the context in which it is written. If our questions are still not answered, we then look to other parts of Scripture.

Most of the book of Revelation contains visions that are filled with symbolism. Throughout Revelation the number four is the number of the earth. But what are these four winds? Angels, God’s messengers, are holding them back, like wild and destructive dogs, straining at their leashes. These winds have the power to cause complete destruction once unleashed, down to the last tree. In Jeremiah 49:36 the prophet decrees judgment against Elam (who helped out Babylonian army when they destroy Jerusalem). Jeremiah prophesied that God’s wrath would be unleashed against Elam with the four winds. These four winds in Revelation must be symbolic of God’s destructive wrath which will be let loose on the Last Day.

I think we have seen hints of these destructive powers over history: The Northridge Earthquake of 1994 in Los Angeles or the earthquake that struck China just a few months ago. Last year tornadoes in the US claimed 81 lives and \$1.4 billion of damage; the tsunami that struck Thailand the day after Christmas in 2004; the hurricanes that have battered our southern coasts. Or how about the atrocities we bring on ourselves; the genocide in Darfur, Sudan; the hundreds who starve to death every day; the millions of unborn that are slaughtered every year in our own country; or the violence of war. All of these events are a preview of the Last Day, when they will finally reach a climax in the utter destruction of the earth. Jesus himself predicted that these events would happen (Mt 24).

Christians understand these things will happen, but that doesn't always make it easier to handle, especially when disaster strikes our home or those we love. The new person created within each of you at your baptisms trusts God and his Almighty Hand to save and protect. But your sinful nature has a fear of loss of possessions, injury and even fears death. Your sinful nature questions God and wonders why these awful things happen to others, especially when they hit close to you.

In the Last Days Jesus also says that persecution will strike his Church (Mt 24). The apostle Paul said, "**We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God.**" (Acts 14:22) Jesus encourages us and says, "If they persecuted, rejected and crucified me, what are they going to do to my followers? But just remember that when they reject you, they are really rejecting me." (Mt 5:11,12; Lk 10:16) But that doesn't make going door-to-door for Faith Lutheran Church any easier, does it? Especially when that grumpy faced old man says, "I don't want any," and slams the door in your face. Knowing Jesus' promises doesn't always make it any easier especially when you are unsure of how your relationship with your coworker or neighbor will continue after you ask them, "So where do you go to church?" They reply, "I don't do church." The awkward silence follows.... Even though we have heard and know Jesus' promises our sinful nature convinces us not to share the life-saving message of the Scriptures, and convinces us to be afraid of what could happen if we do.

Do you know why John received these revelations of Jesus, the Last Days and of heaven? In John's day the government, Rome, had outlawed Christianity. That's why John was writing this book from the island of Patmos. He had been exiled for proclaiming God's Word. Jesus commanded John to record these visions and send the written copy to churches in Asia. The saints living in Asia were ready to abandon the one true faith in Christ because their families and friends were being arrested, thrown in prison and even executed, because they believed and shared the good news of Christ as the Savior of the world. As wild and sometimes confusing as some of these visions seem to be, the book of Revelation is very simple and very comforting to the down-trodden believer. Jesus' message to John and his readers was, "Despite these difficult times, in the end, I win. In the end, you win...even though it doesn't appear that way. And I have placed my seal on your forehead to comfort you and remind you of this truth."

What does that mean, to have God's seal put on your forehead? Long ago in Jesus' day important documents were folded and tied with a thin string. Wax was melted over the knot and the sender would stamp the cooling wax with his signet ring. That seal protected the contents. A messenger knew that if the seal of the document he was delivering was broken, he could be sure the sender would severely punish him. In today's world we send important documents with signature or delivery confirmation. The USPS guarantees that our package will arrive unopened and unharmed.

What is the seal of the living God that the angel holds in his hand? And is this mark literally put on the foreheads of his servants? We use another passage of Scripture to help interpret this text. In 2Corinthians 1:21,22 Paul explains, "**God set his seal of ownership on us, putting his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.**" The apostle Paul explains that God's seal is not a glob of wax imprinted with a ring. The seal is the Holy Spirit himself! God marks your hearts with the Holy Spirit. Remember

when God marked your heart with the Holy Spirit? Your pastor once said to you, “Receive the sign of the cross on the head and heart to mark you as a redeemed child of God.” That action of making the sign of the cross was purely symbolic. But the action that followed was not just a symbol. When your pastor applied water and the Word, the Holy Spirit was set as a seal on your heart. The Holy Spirit then applied to you personally what Jesus had accomplished in his life and on the cross.

Jesus never once backed down when the Pharisees challenged his teachings. Jesus never once was afraid to stand firm for what he knew was the truth. Jesus did not falter or run away from the truth even though he knew his confession, “I am the Son of God,” would secure his death sentence. Through your baptism the Holy Spirit pours out on you this sinless life that Christ lived. Take comfort in this; Jesus accomplished what you and I fail so miserably to do. The seal of the Holy Spirit is your guarantee.

Jesus also took on himself the guarantee of his Father who said, “**The soul who sins is the one who will die.**” For your sins of fear in witnessing to others, for your rebellious attitude of reluctance to boldly share Christ crucified with other sinners, Christ died in place of you. Take comfort in this; Jesus died for you. Jesus then made a guarantee that what he had accomplished with his life and death was valid for you and for all people. He rose from his grave, securing victory over death. Take comfort in this; you were sealed with the Holy Spirit at your baptism. As Paul said, “He guarantees what is to come.” The apostle Paul further explains in Ephesians 1:13 that the Holy Spirit promises your inheritance! In John’s next vision he sees what is in store for you. **I saw 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 (sign of victory). 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.**” (7:9,14) John sees that God will keep his promise to bring all safely to heaven, all who have been marked by his Holy Spirit.

By marking you at your baptism God guarantees your delivery to your final destination. Through this portion of Scripture, he wants you to know that while you wait to stand before the throne of God with that great multitude of saints triumphant, he will preserve a small remnant of faithful believers on earth. That is why the angels have to hold back the destructive four winds. The destruction of the earth on the Last Day is being delayed so that all of God’s elect, those whom he has predestined to be saved, can come to faith through his Word and Sacrament, and then the end will come.

In the midst of epidemic, famine, earthquakes, tornados, war, crime, violence, corrupt leaders, persecution, we know that we will eventually be delivered from these great tribulations. Knowing what is waiting for us, knowing that we will eventually be delivered from this sinful world, you and I will be confident in our witness of Jesus as the Savior, we will stand firm with each other in persecution, we will encourage and strengthen each other when we are rejected by unbelievers, we will remind each other of the joys waiting for us. Take comfort in the fact that you have been marked with the seal of the living God, because this too will pass. As Paul says in Romans 8:18, “**I know that our present sufferings are not worth comparing to the glory that will be revealed in us.**” At the end of the book of Revelation Jesus says, “Yes, I am coming soon.” To which John replies, “Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.” Yes, come quickly, Lord Jesus. Amen.

## **My sermon notes on the 144,000**

*Are these literally 144,000 Jews?*

Rev 14:1 – the Lamb standing on Mt Zion and with him 144,000, who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads, they are blameless (Church triumphant standing in victory over all their enemies)

In the next section of chapter 7 John says he sees 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. Why would a literal number of those saved be given and then John sees a number of people so great that no one can count them all?

*A reference to converted Jews?*

- this list of the tribes does not agree with any list used in the Old Testament for the literal, historical 12 tribes of the children of Israel
- Levi is listed here, never listed in OT, Levi not granted territory, they served as priests, given towns to live in
- Judah listed first – family line of Savior (Rueben was the firstborn)
- Dan not listed at all – early connection with idolatry, tribe fell away
- Joseph is listed, but he was not given a tribe, tribes came from two sons (Ephraim and Manasseh)
- Ephraim is not listed at all either and was a very important tribe in OT, whole northern kingdom was sometimes referred to as Ephraim

*Who are we talking about if not Jews?*

- Rom 2:28ff those who are Jews only outwardly are not true Jews
- Rom 4:16,17 Abraham is the father of all true believers
- Rom 9:8 just because you are descended from Abraham doesn't mean you're an Israelite
- Rom 11 Jews who do not have faith are excluded from God's chosen people, Gentiles who believe are part of the spiritual Israel

*What then is the significance of the number 144,000?*

- in Revelation the number 12 is associated with God's Church, that is, all believers
- 12 squared is 144
- 1,000 is 10 cubed, the number for completeness
  - cubing or squaring a number happens often in Revelation
- add these two together = full number of the elect, or the whole Church as it is known to the omniscience of God