

Just a Lamb

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Revelation 5.1-14 (NRSV)

Then I saw in the right hand of the one seated on the throne a scroll written on the inside and on the back, sealed with seven seals; and I saw a mighty angel proclaiming with a loud voice, "Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?" And no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or to look into it. And I began to weep bitterly because no one was found worthy to open the scroll or to look into it. Then one of the elders said to me, "Do not weep. See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals."

Then I saw between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. He went and took the scroll from the right hand of the one who was seated on the throne. When he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell before the Lamb, each holding a harp and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. They sing a new song:

"You are worthy to take the scroll
and to open its seals,
for you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God
saints from every tribe and language and people and nation;
you have made them to be a kingdom and priests serving our God,
and they will reign on earth."

Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels surrounding the throne and the living creatures and the elders; they numbered myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, singing with full voice,

"Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered
to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might
and honor and glory and blessing!"

Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, singing,

"To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb
be blessing and honor and glory and might
forever and ever!"

And the four living creatures said, "Amen!" And the elders fell down and worshiped.

Introduction

Sometime I hope to teach an adult education class on the Book of Revelation because, as I was saying last week, it may be the least liked and most misinterpreted book in the whole Bible. Many voices around Christian churches today stridently allege that Revelation is a blueprint for the end times by which they mean our times. Myriads of books are sold that say that and myriads of Christians believe that. But I don't and I hope you don't. The voices who argue this way are noisy gongs and their clanging misses what this book is really all about. I hope that class can happen

sometime soon.

But today I want to just focus on chapter 5, the whole of which we have read. I should note that chapter 5, which is about Christ the Redeemer, and chapter 4 before it, which is about God the Creator, are filled with hymns sung in God's heavenly throne room, and these hymns have inspired many other hymns and songs, one of which we are going to sing after the sermon. The songs are all about the glory and greatness of God. But what keeps these chapters from becoming just a tawdry Hollywood-like display of splendiferous wealth and power is that at the center is something very small — a little lamb. Just a lamb. A lamb that has been sacrificed. And that's what gives meaning to everything else. Let's reflect for a moment on the Lamb who is at the center of the story.

ONE: The world's destiny is opened by the Lamb

All of Revelation is purportedly a vision of John of Patmos and chapters 4 and 5 are specifically a vision of the heavenly court. The writing is very dreamlike. You know how in dreams images flow and blend together in sometimes strange and apparently unconnected ways. This dream or vision might remind you of a circus in that all kinds of things are going on all at once, in the center ring, of course, but all around the edges as well. In chapter 4 John sees God on the throne in the center. Around the throne are four (strange) living creatures and twenty-four elders, probably representing the twelve patriarchs of the Old Testament and the twelve apostles of the New Testament and all are singing glory to God: "Holy, holy, holy, the Lord God the Almighty." (4.8b)

Then in chapter 5 John notices that in the hand of God there is a scroll with seven seals. A mighty angel asks, "Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?" But no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth (the ancients' three-storey cosmology of Heaven – Earth – Hades) is found to be worthy of opening the scroll. John weeps bitterly about that. But what's so important about the scroll?

The scroll contains the destiny of the world, the purposes and plans of God for all creation.¹ If the scroll cannot be opened, then God's will cannot be fulfilled. That's why John weeps. But he is assured immediately by one of the elders that there is one who is worthy. "Do not weep. See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals." The Lion of the tribe of Judah is worthy. (Fans of C. S. Lewis' *The Chronicles of Narnia* take note. This is where Lewis found his metaphor for Aslan the lion.) The Lion is worthy. So John looks all around for the great and mighty lion.

And what does he see in the center ring? Just a lamb. Just a little lamb who has been slain. This is one place where the New Revised Standard Version, from which I preach and which is the version of the pew Bibles, is not a good translation. The NRSV translates the phrase "a Lamb standing *as if* it had been slaughtered." "As if" could imply that maybe the lamb wasn't slaughtered or it was only pretend. Yet the key that opens this chapter is the lamb's very real sacrifice. The New English Bible translates it better: "a Lamb with the marks of slaughter upon him."² John looks for a lion and sees a Lamb still bearing the marks of slaughter. It is the Lamb and only the Lamb who worthily opens the scroll to reveal the destiny of the world and God's purpose for all creation.

¹ Mitchell G. Reddish, *Revelation (Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary)* (Macon, Georgia: Smyth & Helwys, 2001) 108.

² New English Bible translation.

You see, my friend, the cross of Jesus Christ where the Lamb of God was sacrificed for the whole world is the very center, the very heart of all that we believe and all that we hope. Without the Lamb, the glory of Revelation is crushing power and crushing power never wins the human heart. God wins our hearts with the sacrifice of love.

TWO: God's gonna take care of you

Here's a story that opens up what all this means. It's a story told by Martin Luther King Jr. in his book *Strength to Love* written in 1963.

King writes that one of the most dedicated participants in the bus protest in Montgomery, Alabama in 1956, was an elderly Negro whom everyone affectionately called Mother Pollard. Although poverty-stricken and uneducated, Mother Pollard was keenly intelligent and deeply understood what King and others were trying to accomplish. After marching in protest for long stretches over several weeks, Mother Pollard was asked if she was tired. She answered, "My feets is tired, but my soul is rested."

On a particular Monday evening after a tense week when King had been arrested and received many threatening phone calls, he spoke at a mass meeting. He tried to convey an impression of strength and courage but inwardly he was depressed and stricken with fear. At the end of the meeting, Mother Pollard came to the front of the church and said, "Come here, son." King went to her and hugged her affectionately.

"Something is wrong with you," she said. "You didn't talk strong tonight." Trying to disguise his fears, King replied, "Oh, no, Mother Pollard, nothing is wrong. I am feeling as fine as ever." But she saw through it. "Now you can't fool me," she said. "I knows something is wrong. Is it that we ain't doing things to please you? Or is it that the white folks is bothering you?"

And before King could respond, she looked directly into his eyes and said, "I don told you we is with you all the way." Then her face became radiant and she said in words of quiet certainty, "But even if we ain't with you, God's gonna take care of you." And as she spoke those consoling words, everything in Martin Luther King quivered and quickened with a pulsing tremor of raw energy.

King wrote that since that dreary night, Mother Pollard had passed on to glory and he had known very few quiet days. He had been tortured without and tormented within by all manner of tribulation. He had been forced to muster what strength and courage he had to withstand pain and adversity. But as the years unfolded the eloquently simple words of Mother Pollard came back again and again to give light and peace and guidance to his troubled soul, "God's gonna take care of you."³

Mother Pollard's words express everything that Revelation is trying to say. God's gonna take care of you. How do we know that? Because at the center of it all is just a Lamb, a Lamb with the marks of slaughter still upon it. That sacrifice reveals the character of God. That sacrifice reveals the depth of God's love. That sacrifice wins our hearts as it did the heart of Mother Pollard and the heart of Martin Luther King and the heart of John of Patmos. It wins the hearts of myriads upon myriads who now sing, "Worthy is the Lamb."

Conclusion

A final thought. Dr. Bruce Thielmann was for many years the pastor of First Presbyterian

³ Martin Luther King Jr., *Strength to Love* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963) 116-117.

Church in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania and before that at the First Presbyterian Church in Glendale, California. That's where I heard him deliver the most powerful Easter sermon I've ever heard and certainly more powerful than any I've ever preached. He gave a lecture once about preaching and worship that I heard on a cassette tape. He told about a little girl who went with her mom and dad to the circus one Saturday afternoon. On Sunday morning they went to church. When they were going home after church, the little girl asked, "Mommy and Daddy, what isn't church as fun as the circus?"

So Dr. Thielmann posed that question to preachers: how can we make church more like the circus? He wasn't speaking irreverently. But at the circus, you see, we are totally caught up in a separate and exciting place away from the world. Our hearts almost stop when the trapeze artists fly through the air or when the high wire artist almost falls. We can't believe our eyes when all those clowns get out of one little toy car. We're thrilled by elephants and horses and lions doing wondrous things. The sounds and the smells enliven our senses. And we go away wanting more. Why can't church be more like that?

Well, believe it or not, I want church here to be more like the circus. I know this doesn't happen for all of you every week. But I hope that at least sometimes when we come into this room it is separate from the world and the way the world thinks and acts. I hope that at least sometimes our hearts thrill at the sublime beauty of what we hear and the strange power of connectedness we feel with each other and the Spirit of God. I hope at least sometimes we can't believe how much comes out of even a few words of a prayer, a song, a sacrament, even a sermon. I hope at least sometimes our senses are enlivened here and we go away wanting more. At least sometimes.

And today go away knowing this, that every Sunday there is in the center ring here a Lamb who is a lion and a lion who is a Lamb. At the very least, that should always thrill our hearts. For the Lamb of God reveals the destiny of the world. That means, as Mother Pollard would say, "God's gonna take care of you." No matter what.