

## Season after Pentecost

August 19 & 20, 2017

Haven Lutheran Church Hagerstown MD  
Readings: John 1: 29-31; Revelation 5: 1-14

*(With the busy week of Haven's Block Party and School Supply Giveaway, I borrowed a great deal of this sermon from the sermons of William Willimon and Charles Hoffacker and the writings of Barbara Rossing. I am grateful for their words, insights and wisdom.)*

*Grace to you and peace from God - who was and is and is to come. Amen*

We may not think worship should be entertainment... We may question the line between employing modern music, language and technology to worship and worshipping modern music, language and technology.... We usually insist that worship should not be a show. But you will have to admit that when God gives John a vision of worship in the heavenly realm, it is one impressive display.

The letter called *Revelation* "was addressed to a dispirited, disheartened church....There were persecutions by the emperor for some of these churches. Others were simply ignored by their pagan neighbors." What does it mean to follow Jesus amid so much hostility so many years after his life, death, resurrection and ascension? "Was the whole Easter thing an idle tale? A dream? Wishful thinking? [What does God do when the resurrection seems way back then, far away?] God gives a vision...." <sup>1</sup>

We started looking at this strange book last week, starting with chapter 4. "The show opens when the curtain is raised in heaven itself (Rev.4:7). First we see the heavenly throne, surrounded by twenty-four elders seated upon their thrones (Rev. 4:2)."<sup>2</sup> The Almighty is so glorious, John can only describe God with the beauty of jewels and the power of flashing of lightning, and peals of thunder. Encircling the throne are four living creatures — a lion, a bull, a human, an eagle — representing all of creation who shout and sing unceasing praise to God on the throne as the elders bow and join in unison.

Today, "the spotlight falls upon a sealed scroll in with seven seals that is in the right hand of God. A book or scroll so well sealed it must contain the deepest of mysteries [of history and the future.] But no one in the heavenly court [is worthy to] break the seals."<sup>3</sup> John begins to weep. He weeps for all who weep here on earth, wondering what will

happen to them, will the Romans, oppression, injustice and evil truly reign forever? He weeps because we want the assurance and hope in knowing God's end game.

One of the elders tells John not to weep. There IS one worthy — the Lion of Judah, the Root of David who has conquered. Now you're talking. As Barbara Rossing wrote, "Two words — 'lion' and 'conquer' — lead us to expect a fierce animal to open the scroll, an animal like the conquering lions of gladiatorial spectacles so common at the time *Revelation* was written. A lion also is a typical character [of power] in an apocalypse.

"Yet *Revelation* delivers an amazing surprise. In the place of the lion a Lamb: 'Then I saw.... a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered..' (Rev. 5: 6). Here is a complete switch, an unexpected reversal.... No other apocalypse portrays its divine hero as a lamb. *Revelation* is unique in its use of this image. This is a depiction of Jesus in the most vulnerable way possible as a victim, a lamb, who is slaughtered. He is slain but standing upright, thus he is shown to be crucified yet risen to life."<sup>4</sup>

"The Lamb becomes the central symbol of Christ for all of *Revelation*." There is an important reason: the lamb underscored Jesus' vulnerability and innocent suffering — experiences many of John's ancient reader could relate to, given the exclusion [and suffering] that resulted when they rejected Roman culture" {to follow Jesus.}

"The Lamb is a wondrously disarming vision. In the face of Rome's ideology of victory by power and might, the Lamb of *Revelation* reveals the power of love. Instead of prevailing military strength, we are given the Lamb's nonviolent power. In place of Rome's well-earned reputation for inflicting slaughter on the world, *Revelation* tells the story of the Lamb who has been slaughtered — who still bears the scars of that slaughter yet is strong. That is what the horns represent. "The number seven symbolizes wholeness, fullness and completion. [The Lamb's power is complete, greater than any other]..." So is his vision. The Lamb's seven eyes represent complete, perfected perception"<sup>5</sup>

, knowledge, wisdom. *Revelation* turns the traditional perception of power on its head to reveal what true power and true victory are: At the heart of the power of the universe stands Jesus, God's slain Lamb."<sup>6</sup>

Just like the Lamb, God's people are called to conquer evil not by hate or vengeance, but by remaining faithful, by testifying to God's victory in [word and] self-giving love." That is the great challenge when we stand up to confront the bully, the oppressor or hate groups. Hate will not be overcome by more hate. An eye for an eye style of protesting will only lead to a world of blindness. No, the Lamb of God, who forgave even his executioners, shows us another pathway. Theologian Ward Ewing calls it "Lamb Power," a lifestyle oriented around Jesus's self-giving love. "Lamb power is the power of vulnerable but strong love to change the world."<sup>7</sup> It is the power of nonviolent resistance and courage; it is the power of our acts of solidarity and forgiveness.... This redefinition of power would have meant a great deal to the churches to whom John was writing. It is also for us who wonder when the hate and violence will ever end. In the midst of their feelings of powerlessness, they had the gift of the Lamb to show them greater hope than they could ever imagine. At the very heart of God is a slain Lamb — Jesus. And this slain Lamb has somehow **conquered**."<sup>8</sup> This is the power of the Lamb.

The power of the Lamb!  
A love stronger than hatred.  
A reconciliation stronger than estrangement.  
A forgiveness stronger than sin.  
A joy stronger than sorrow.  
A peace stronger than violence.  
A hope stronger than despair.  
A life stronger than death.  
The power of the Lamb!

[Who is the greatest lion of them all.<sup>9</sup>]

All living creatures and the elders worship this Lamb who is the greatest lion of them all, with harps and the incense of rising prayers. They sing a new song to the Lord who lived, died and rose for “God’s saints from every tribe and language and people and nation.” They are joined by the angels and every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them.” It may not be a show but it is quite a scene.

“And what [else] does it mean? What does a wild vision like that mean for ordinary people like you and me? What difference does it make that the slaughtered lamb sits beside exalted God, the Creator almighty on the golden throne at the center of heaven?”

[William Willimon wondered about this very thing several weeks after a celebration of Easter. He was preaching at Duke University chapel when he said - ] “A friend of mine, Jim Wallis of the Sojourners Community in Washington, was visiting Coretta Scott King during the celebration of the birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr. She asked him to go to the Georgia State Penitentiary and visit a young man who has been in jail since he was 16 and murdered a young woman. He has been on death row for three years. He will be executed later this year.

“Wallis said that, when he saw him, the first thing that the young man said was, “Hey preacher, what’s the good news?”

“For one long moment,” Wallis said, “I looked at this one who would be dead in a few months for having caused the death of another and I didn’t know any good news.”

Two weeks ago, when the glorious Easter services here were done and the show was over, I went to my office and there was a note on my desk. The note said, "We are from South Carolina and were in the Chapel this morning because our twelve-year-old son is in Duke Hospital, paralyzed. Thanks for the beautiful service."

"Thanks for the beautiful service." Willimon continued. "Does a beautiful service explain a paralyzed twelve-year-old boy? What difference does it make?"

"Well, what word do you say to the victims of those on death row and to those who are on death row? What is the good news for a paralyzed child and his parents? If there is a word, it must be bigger, grander, than our usual prosaic exhortations... It will have to be a word that's cosmic, poetic, outside, beyond the bounds of the expected, the conventional. It will be sung by a choir rather than argued by a preacher-that sort of word.

"The Lamb, which... was stripped, beaten, humiliated, and nailed on a cross to die, this one now sits enthroned in glory next to the Creator of the universe. .Everything that God has — all wisdom, power, blessing and honor — now belongs to the lamb, the lamb who knows what it's like to be on death row because he's been there, the lamb who knows what it's like to be helpless because he's been there. And because the lamb, who has been here, sits on the throne up there we do have something to show the child dying of starvation in the African desert, the refugee perishing in the camp in Lebanon, the young man on death row in Atlanta, the child in Duke Hospital, [the families of those plowed down by cars driven by hate.]

"What we show is a vision of a new heaven and a new earth where the one who was slain, in behalf of all these who are slain, now rules in glory.

Willimon concludes: "Oh gentle, hurting, baffled, tearful ones, wherever you languish..., peer through the bars of your cell, turn your head to catch the light through your hospital window, see the vision and hear the song, sung by hosts in heaven and choirs on earth: "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain!"<sup>10</sup> God is not done yet. Despair, fear, hate are not more powerful than God, no matter how it may seem. Sing a new song and **be** a new song that speaks love to hate in the name of the Lamb who was slaughtered but stands, with all power and glory. Amen. Linda M Alessandri 8/15/17

## ENDNOTES

- 
1. adapted from William Willimon, "Worship: Good Show!" as posted on <https://www.preaching.com/sermons/worship-good-show-text-revelation-511-14/>
  2. adapted from William Willimon, "Worship: Good Show!" as posted on <https://www.preaching.com/sermons/worship-good-show-text-revelation-511-14/>
  3. adapted from William Willimon, "Worship: Good Show!" as posted on <https://www.preaching.com/sermons/worship-good-show-text-revelation-511-14/>
  4. Barbara Rossing, Journey Through Revelation: Apocalyptic Hope for Today p.25
  5. Brian K. Blount, Revelation: A Commentary" Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009 p.112
  6. Barbara Rossing, Journey Through Revelation: Apocalyptic Hope for Today p 25
  7. Ward Ewing, The Power of the Lamb as cited and quoted by Barbara Rossing, Journey Through Revelation: Apocalyptic Hope for Today p. 26-27
  8. Barbara Rossing, Journey Through Revelation: Apocalyptic Hope for Today p27
  9. Charles Hoffacker, "The Power of the Lamb," 2006 as posted on <https://www.sermonwriter.com/sermons/revelation-511-14-power-lamb-hoffacker>
  10. William Willimon, "Worship: Good Show!" as posted on <https://www.preaching.com/sermons/worship-good-show-text-revelation-511-14/>