

"WHO IS WORTHY?"
Revelation 5:1-14
May 5, 2019
York Center Church of the Brethren
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Are you still afraid of the book of Revelation?

When we left off last week, Pastor John was living in exile on the island of Patmos. That was where the Roman Empire put troublemakers. And apparently John was a troublemaker because of his outspoken belief that the Risen Christ was greater than the Roman emperor. Unable to see or talk to his seven congregations, John wrote them letters explaining in rich and vivid detail a vision he was given by God. This letter is called "Revelation" and it is the last book in the New Testament of our Bible. It is probably one of the most misunderstood and misused works of scripture.

Contrary to popular opinion, this is not a letter of doom and destruction but is instead a letter of hope and expectation written to vulnerable congregations at a time when emperor worship was the law of the land. Over the centuries people have turned this letter of love into a timetable for disaster and judgement; a roadmap of the end of the world. What John wrote with love and faith to encourage his churches, others have used to terrify, confuse, and exclude. Just two generations after the ecstasy of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit infused the young church with divine power, Christians in Asia Minor are bowing to the pressure to worship the emperor. They are being intimidated by the powerful Roman Empire and for the sake of their own economic security and social acceptance, they are worshipping at the temples of the false gods. They think it is harmless but John tells them that it is unacceptable.

Revelation follows in the biblical genre of apocalyptic literature and draws much of its bizarre imagery from the Old Testament books of Daniel and Ezekiel. The word "apocalypse" means unveiling, uncovering that which is hidden. Through the use of this fantastic imagery, the present suffering is given meaning by placing it in a cosmic context.

Remember that Revelation isn't about the end of the world. It is about the end of evil. Apocalyptic literature is an interpretation of the present, not a prediction of the future. If we don't understand this then we miss the whole point of the letter. Theologian Barbara Rossing suggests that Revelation is an expose. She likens John

to Dorothy's little dog, Toto. Remember that climactic scene near the end of "The Wizard of Oz" when Toto pulls back the curtain and reveals the less than impressive true identity of the wizard? Revelation pulls back the curtain to show that the Roman Empire is not the great eternal power it claims to be. John pulls back the curtain to reveal that, no matter what the cost, only the one, true, Creator God is worthy of worship. Understood in this light, we see that the Revelation isn't a series of predictions to be deciphered, but rather a journey into God's vision of hope and promise for our world.

Our text for this morning leads us into an awesome world of worship and thanksgiving. In Revelation John makes vibrant connections between worship and justice, liturgy and political transformation. For Christians living in a hostile world, worship is a subversive and radical act of rebellion.

In John's vision he is taken to heaven and the first thing he sees is a throne room. It is the throne room of God and it is majestic and opulent- with gold crowns, lightning and thunder, a sea of crystal, and a rainbow. There are white-robed elders and flaming torches; unusual living creatures with many wings and eyes. All of the creatures- human and animal- spend all of their time singing praises to God, the One on the throne.

Their response to being in God's presence? Constant praise and total devotion. This scene includes all aspects of God's creation- it does not separate the natural world from the spiritual world. God created everything and it is all good and it is all included.

For John's congregations, the symbolism of the throne room couldn't be any clearer. The One they are called to worship is the Creator God in the heavenly throne room, not the human pretender on the cheap imitation of a throne in Rome.

The next thing John sees is a scroll in the hand of God. It is sealed with seven seals. The first century Christians would immediately know that "scroll" meant scripture. It is God's word to them; the story of their faith. An angel called out for one who is worthy to open the scroll but no one can be found who is worthy. And John begins to weep. This is such a poignant moment. Imagine John's thrill at seeing this vision of the magnificent throne room, all of the amazing creatures, and the actual presence of God. Then someone holds out the scriptures and finally John is going to have the chance to hear the Word of God and understand what it all means. But the moment is ruined when no one is able to read it.

Eugene Peterson wrote, *"The scroll is sealed. The text of the scroll had been carefully, reverently, and meticulously preserved, but its meaning was sealed under*

centuries of arguments and unbelief. It was an old problem. Seven hundred years earlier the prophet Isaiah had lamented that the vision was sealed up and no one was qualified to unseal it. It was discussed but not believed; it was copied but not obeyed." (1)

Now finally, after centuries, the scroll was to be opened and read, imagine John's excitement. But no one could do it so he wept bitterly; totally and utterly disappointed. Then an elder said to him, "Don't weep, look over here, the Lion of Judah can do it." But when John looked he didn't see a Lion, he saw a Lamb, still bearing the wounds and scars of torture. He was surprised and stopped weeping. It was the Risen Christ.

Does this scene remind you of anything? When I read it I was taken back to two weeks ago when we heard about Mary weeping in the cemetery. She thought she knew what she was going to find when she arrived at the tomb of the dead Jesus. But when it wasn't what she expected, she wept bitterly; forlorn and desperately sad. In the midst of her pain though, she turned around and saw someone she didn't recognize. Then the Risen Christ called her name.

And the Risen Christ continues to surprise us. In John's vision, when the Lamb took the scroll, all of the beings - more than he could count- in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea began to sing praises. Pay attention to who is singing- John's list includes **all** creatures including those on the earth and those under the earth- what we call "hell," and in the sea which was known as the home of chaos. This is a comprehensive view of inclusivity. This is no description of a bloody judgment day but a day when all are welcome to worship the Risen Christ.

"One of the signs of the inbreaking reign of God for the early church, was that its worship brought together those who were otherwise separated by the highly segregated society of the Greco-Roman world: slave/free, Jew/Gentile, male/female, haves/have nots/ pure/impure. In this magnificent revelation a diverse, multicultural community came together to sing its praise to the victory of the Lamb and the revelation of God's judgment upon the oppressive socioeconomic values of the empire. (Erik M. Heen)

The earliest Christian congregations were about the only place people of all backgrounds, traditions, and status could gather as one. Then, as now, worship is central to our identity and mission as God's people. It is in worship that the human community is shaped into the image of Christ. The life of faith is revealed and nurtured through scripture in a highly personal, but never private way. In the biblical story there is always a family, a tribe, a nation- the church. John's vision wasn't given to him and him alone, to enjoy in the privacy of his room.

It was given to this pastor in exile to share with the seven churches in his care. Love, grace, and hope cannot exist and flourish in isolation from other believers. As much as we might want to think we can be Christians by ourselves- we can't. There are probably times when we would rather worship Christ on our own terms and conditions without the hassle of other people. But that doesn't take us very far in our faith.

Eugene Peterson reminds us that in John's vision and in our experience, *"Christ is not seen apart from the gathered, listening, praying, believing, worshipping, people to whom he is Lord and Savior. It is not possible to have Christ apart from the church. God makes the church. The Holy Spirit breathes on the chaotic and random population and makes a people of God, a church. A church only has being in relation to Christ."* (2)

And the church only has its life and mission affirmed through worship. Look around this room this morning- is there any other place, any other way that this particular group of people would have gathered in the same place at the same time? We have such different backgrounds, beliefs, jobs, families, experiences- and yet, somehow, all of us have answered the call to not only participate in worship this morning- but to be a part of this family of faith we call the York Center Church of the Brethren. It boggles my mind.

I have heard people say and I have said it myself- "I won't be a part of the church because it is full of hypocrites." My response? "Well, duh. Of course it is full of hypocrites- because it is full of fallible human beings. And we will gladly slide over in the pew and make room for you too."

In John's time gathering for worship in any one of those seven churches was politically dangerous. Private faith was much safer and more convenient. But John knew that wasn't true worship. He affirms each congregation for the ways in which they are living into their identity in Jesus Christ.

He celebrates Ephesus for untiring, unflagging, and vigilant work; Smyrna for brave suffering; Pergamum for courageous witness; Thyatira for growing and developing discipleship; Philadelphia for brave steadfastness.

Peterson wrote, *"The church is a community where who we are and what we do is recognized and celebrated quite apart from the fads and fashions of the world. As such the church is a glorious place: quiet, unnoticed, courageous lives develop out of the affirmations that take place in these communities."* (3)

As much as John loves the folks within these seven congregations- he isn't blind to their shortcomings and failures. He challenges the folks in Laodicea for being lukewarm; the folks at Thyatira for immorality; the congregation at Ephesus for abandoning their passion for Christ; the people in Sardis for being apathetic. He doesn't gloss over the problems- they are all in need of renewal and reformation. But he also doesn't write them off because of their failures.

According to Peterson, "The church is the place where we come to find out what we are doing that is right; it is a place of affirmation. The church is the place where we come to find out what we are doing that is wrong; it is a place for correction. The church is the place where we come to hear the promises; it is a place of motivation. No Christian community can do without any part of this message." (4)

Pastor John neither complains of nor glorifies his congregations. They are God's means for calling persons together so they can realize who their Lord is, and who they are, and develop the relationships that are coherent with those identities. (5)

What we learn from John's letter is what is necessary for congregations to flourish in difficult times. What is necessary? Vision, hope, encouragement, and sometimes some no-nonsense guidance.

For John the only possible response to the resurrection of Jesus Christ is worship. And when John's congregations worshipped the Risen Christ they were saying quite clearly that they **weren't** worshipping the emperor. And that is what got them into trouble. That is what made them subversive and radical and dangerous to the empire.

Each element of the symbolism in John's vision proves to his readers that God and Christ are to be worshiped above and beyond any human being or human institution. When the angels sing, "Worthy is the Lamb," they are using a well-known political term in the Greek-speaking part of the Roman Empire. Whenever the emperor appeared in public the crowds were commanded to shout, "Worthy! Worthy! Worthy is the emperor!" John takes that song of praise away from the pretender and gives it to the One to whom it belongs.

Can you see why his vision was so subversive? Revelation was almost a parody of human power. All of the voices in heaven and earth are singing their praises not to the human ruler whose victory came through the weapons of the Roman army, but to the Lamb, the one who was arrested, tortured, and killed by that same army. Victory comes not through violence and oppression but through love and grace.

The seven congregations displayed a defiant faith that refused to bow to the powers that be. John called them to be courageous and not to compromise their beliefs. He called them to turn away from the false security of the culture and the political powers and to give their love and loyalty to the only One who deserves it—the One who gave them life.

May it be so with us.

Amen.

End Notes:

- *REVERSED THUNDER: THE REVELATION OF JOHN AND THE PRAYING IMAGINATION, Eugene H. Peterson. Harper San Francisco. 1988. Pg. 64.*
- *Peterson, pg. 44 and 46.*
- *Peterson, pg. 51.*
- *Peterson, pg. 53.*
- *Peterson, pg. 54.*