

Revelation 5:11-14

Rev. 5:11 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, 12 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!”

13 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!”

14 And the four living creatures said, “Amen!” And the elders fell down and worshiped.

A GRAND OLD FLAG

What is the American flag? You might say that it's nothing special. It's just a bit of cloth with stars and stripes sewn together.

And yet when I see the American flag I am sometimes filled with deep emotion. When the Star Spangled Banner is played before a ball game I put my hand over my heart and direct my attention to the flag.

Sometimes I am moved to tears. And I notice that some around me feel the same way.

When I see the flag I am reminded of our history as a people. I think about those first patriots who risked family and fortune in order to establish this country. When I see the flag I think about the struggle to form a working government and the continuing struggle to make that government work.

When I see the flag I think of all those little flags planted in cemeteries all over our country, a silent testimony to the high cost of freedom. I am still transfixed by the picture of our Marines raising the flag at Iwo Jima.

There is also personal history attached to the flag.

My father and my father in law served in the Pacific theater during WWII. They tell me stories about the difficulties they faced, how boys were forced to become men. Two of my uncles (one from each side of the family) served bravely and received medals for their service.

But, both of them never recovered from the psychological trauma of combat and eventually ended up committing suicide.

I remember a tough little man in the church I served in North Carolina. He was a colonel in the Marine Corps, and sometimes that little colonel would come out in our Session meetings!

But, he was also a remarkably sensitive man. Sometimes he would remember the men who died right in front of him, and he would cry like a baby. He wondered why he lived and the others died.

I'm sure almost all of you here today have a personal story to tell as well.

So, though the flag is just a piece of cloth it is more than that. It is a symbol of our country. It is a symbol of our history. It is a symbol of personal sacrifice.

We do not take our flag lightly. When it is time to retire our flag we do it in a dignified fashion. When our veterans die we present a flag to the family.

In a time of fear and uncertainty we fly the flag proudly. We show others that despite our differences we are together as a country.

And there are many songs dedicated to the flag. It's a grand old flag.

THE POWER OF A SYMBOL

Now why am I talking about the flag? It's not the Fourth of July. It's not Flag Day. It's not Memorial Day.

I'm talking about the flag because it demonstrates the power of a symbol. A symbol can be a shorthand way to remind us of crucial historical events and how those events still play a role in our life today.

That's what the book of Revelation is all about too. It's about the symbols of the Christian faith.

Now I have found that when you use that word symbol in regard to the Bible people begin to get nervous. They think that if we talk about symbolism we're talking about things that are not real. They are only "symbolic."

But, in a way symbols have the power to point beyond themselves to a reality that is too grand to speak about in detail.

Take my flag example. Usually I don't go through the whole history of the country when I look at the flag with a sense of pride and devotion. But, that history is

behind the emotion I feel in regards to the flag. The flag is a shorthand way to trigger my sense of connection to the Republic for which it stands.

In the same way the symbols of Revelation provide us with shorthand ways to connect with our faith history and the promise of an even greater salvation.

When we truly understand the meaning of our Christian symbols, they become powerful aids to worship. All heaven breaks out even in the midst of trying times.

HEAVEN IS THE CONTEXT

Today I want us to focus on one of the more important symbols in the Bible, the Lamb of God. Think of the Lamb of God as a kind of flag for the Christian faith.

Who is this lamb? And why is this lamb so important?

The context for our lesson today is heaven. Following the letter to the seven churches John's vision switches to the throne of God and to the praise of God in all His glory.

That vision in chapter four is filled with symbols of power and might. There are mystical beasts, the seraphim that proclaim the holiness of God. Rulers, the 24 elders cast their crowns before God's throne. Heaven proclaims the majesty of God in song.

John wants us to use our imagination. He is saying,

"Think of the most impressive ceremony you have ever seen, an image of power and might, and then multiply that to the nth degree."

All the symbols in this image of heaven emphasize the holiness and might of God.

THE LAMB OF GOD

But, look what happens when we come to the fifth chapter. We begin (as one commentator put it) on a "note that is several octaves below the high point reached at the end of chapter 4."

A hush falls over the scene. God holds a scroll that is sealed with seven seals. An angel searches for someone who is worthy to open the scroll and break the seals. But, no one is found to be worthy.

If the seals are never broken, God's plan for the defeat of evil and the coming of God's kingdom will never take place. John breaks into tears at the thought.

But, at this point an elder tells John to stop weeping. The Lion of Judah has conquered and is worthy. John turns to see the lion, but what he sees instead is “a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered.”

The Lamb goes to the throne and takes the scroll. The elders immediately fall before him and worship. And once again all heaven breaks out. A chorus of praise continues to grow. Angels, the elders, and “myriads of myriads” join the song singing at “blastissimo” (that’s really loud).

I love singing in a mass choir and this choir is the most gigantic choir anyone has ever seen. A myriad is ten thousand, and so when John says “myriads of myriads” join the chorus, it is a way of saying that there are so many singers that they can’t be counted.

WORTHY

And this is the song that they sing, “Worthy is the Lamb.”

The word “worthy” had political implications in that part of the world. Just as the band plays “Hail to the Chief” when the President of the United States comes to town, so people in the first century were trained to shout when the Roman emperor appeared in public, “Worthy! Worthy! Worthy! Worthy is the emperor!”

But, in this vision it is the Lamb who is worthy.

And why is this Lamb worthy?

This is the Lamb that was slain, the Suffering Servant, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

This Lamb is Jesus, the crucified one.

The scars still remain even when he is also the resurrected one, the Lord worthy of worship and praise by the host of heaven.

THE PARADOX OF SALVATION

This is the great paradox of salvation. The Lion of Judah is the Lamb who was slain. The One who is worthy to receive power, wisdom, wealth, and might is also the crucified one.

The contrasting images are jarring. On the one hand we have this marvelous vision of power, and on the other hand we have this picture of utter weakness and defeat.

If I wanted to pick a symbol for God's kingdom, I would pick some mighty animal, an eagle or a bear or a lion. But, in heaven the Lion of Judah, the Messiah is a slaughtered Lamb.

Surely God's ways are not our ways.

But, in the seeming weakness of God's ways, we see real power.

The Lamb is able to open the seals of the scroll. The hinge of history is found in this Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. He is able to defeat the powers of evil.

THE WORLD JOINS THE SONG

And in response the joy of heaven cannot be contained to the heavenly throne room. It spills over into the earth. "Every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them" join the song.

All creation joins the choir. The commentator in the Presbyterian Women's study playfully wondered what it might sound like if her cat or dog would join in the praise.

But, that's exactly what happened. All creatures great and small join in the celebration.

And the song of creation expands their song to include the "one seated on the throne," the one that has already been praised in chapter 4. To that one and to the Lamb the same word of worship is offered, "blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!"

In general it is not too good to use the word "and" more than once in a sentence. But, in this case it is a good thing. The "ands" have the effect of magnifying the praise ... "blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever."

You can see what this vision teaches us about Christ. It is a high Christology. The throne of God and the Lamb are the same level. The same worship is offered to both.

In chapter 4 the heavenly chorus worships God as the creator of all things. In chapter 5, verses 1-12 the heavenly chorus praises the Lamb. And now in chapter 5, verse 13 the Lamb and the Creator are praised by every creature in the whole creation.

The only thing left to do is say “Amen.” And that’s exactly what the four living creatures do in verse 14. And the 24 elders once again fall down and worship.

GLORY OVERSHADOWS EVIL

Now I know some of you are reluctant to study Revelation. There’s a reason for that.

This scene of heaven’s glory will be replaced in the chapters that follow with scenes of mayhem and destruction. When the seals are opened the final battle with evil begins.

The images in this section are quite disturbing and bizarre, even as evil itself is disturbing and bizarre.

But, it’s important to read these powerful images of death and destruction in light of how the story begins. Yes, we will read about the four horsemen of the apocalypse, the plagues and the violence that goes with them, even as we experience similar events in our world today.

But, today’s scene in heaven reminds us that the final victory has already been won. In the midst of trying times we remember the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, the one who was “wounded for our transgressions.” (Isaiah 53:5)

For the early Christians, the powers of darkness were everywhere. The book of Revelation was possibly penned during the reign of the Roman emperor, Domitian in the late first century. Domitian strengthened emperor worship and instituted a general persecution of atheists.

Now who were the atheists? Atheists were defined as those who didn’t worship the emperor! And Christians were certainly included in that group. John saw the handwriting on the wall. The “beast” was about to be revealed. Evil would have its way.

What could the people of God do in the face of such persecution?

John saw the cure in worship. Joining the heavenly chorus while we are still on earth is a game changer. The Lamb still is the one who is able to do what no one else can do.

SINGING TODAY

The problems we face today are different from those that faced the early church but they are also serious and real. The four horsemen of the apocalypse still ride. There is a disdain for the creation and the Creator in our world.

There are those who despise the notion of a God who suffers with us and for us, a Lamb of God who dies for the sins of the world. It all seems so foolish to them.

But, the Apostle Paul tells us that the “foolishness” of God is wiser than the world’s wisdom. Like Paul we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to many but a word of salvation to those who are being saved.

We sing, “Worthy is the Lamb that was slain.”

In the face of evil we lift our eyes toward heaven. We remember that the seals are broken and the darkness flees.

In the final analysis, the solution to the world’s problems will not be found in what we can do on our own. The solution will be found in what God does in and through our broken world.

The solution will be found in what God does in spite of us.

As the praise and worship hymn puts it, “We bring the sacrifice of praise.”

LAYING DOWN OUR LIVES

And we praise God not only by laying down our lips; we also praise God by laying down our lives for the kingdom on a daily basis.

When we sing, “worthy is the lamb that was slain” we have the opportunity to turn our thinking and our living upside down.

We learn to say “Amen” to God’s promises and God’s call to service. We learn to find God in those places where the world is broken and the broken places in our own life.

I heard of a minister who ordered custom-made wallpaper for his study. His entire wall was plastered with just four words,

“Trust God; let go.”

Over and over it repeated, “Trust God; let go. Trust God; let go.”

In a world filled with violence we are reluctant to do that. We hold on to our fear instead of our faith. Like the minister we need a daily reminder.

Trust God; let go.

One way to do that is to plaster on the wall of our mind this vision of heaven. We must learn to internalize this symbol of our faith.

And one good way to do that is by singing.

There was a story in the Presbyterian Women's Bible study that was just too good to pass up. (Sorry Ona for stealing your thunder.) It was about the great gospel singer, Mahalia Jackson.

Mahalia Jackson was born in New Orleans in 1911. Many encouraged her to become a blues singer. But, she refused to sing anything but gospel.

This is how she explained it,

"When you sing gospel, you have the feeling that there's a cure for what's wrong. But when you're through with the blues, you've got nothing to rest on."

There are a lot of people in our world who are "singing the blues," people who have nothing to rest on. But, we are called to sing a new song, a song that gives hope to a broken and hopeless people.

Won't you join me in that song?

Won't you join the heavenly chorus and me as we sing?

"Worthy is the Lamb that was slain?"

Amen.