

Sermons at Union Congregational Church

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May 12, 2019

Fourth Sunday of Easter

Revelation 7:9-17

Psalm 23

John 10:22-30

Shepherd and Lamb

Our Epistle reading this morning is from the *Book of Revelation*, also known as the *Apocalypse of John*. John was exiled to the Island of Patmos, where he received a revelation from God, through Jesus, via an Angel. This vision occurred during an ecstatic experience of being filled with Holy Spirit. John recorded what he saw, and it has been conveyed to us through the ages.

While Revelation is addressed to a particular people, in a particular place, at a particular time, under particular circumstance, this message holds universal truths transcending the immediate time and audience, which gave rise to it.

Revelation is an example of apocalyptic writing. In fact, it is the longest apocalypse contained within the Bible. Some other examples of apocalyptic writing can be found in Ezekiel, Daniel, Zechariah and the Gospels.

Apocalyptic writing has certain conventions; among them are having a divine interpreter explain what is going to the recipient of the vision. This is important, because another convention of apocalyptic writing is the heavy use of symbols. The symbols chosen are often used to create images, which are sometimes jarring, bizarre, or paradoxical.

Society has co-opted the phrase apocalypse. Its connotation differs from its original meaning. We hear the word apocalypse and many of us think of the movie *Apocalypse Now*, or *Zombie Apocalypse*. That is not quite right. Apocalypse literally means *lifting of the veil*, or *uncovering*. Its goal is to expose a greater truth and faithful hope for a better future. A future that will resolve and explain the current troubled circumstances of the audience.

I want to stress that an apocalypse gives hope to those who hear it.

Before I read our lesson passage, to help clarify some of what you're about to hear, I want to talk about the symbol of the Lamb. The Lamb is a symbol for Jesus Christ.

Following the addressing of this letter, John begins describing his vision, Heaven and earth are being searched for someone worthy of opening a scroll sealed with seven seals, or sealed perfectly. A divine interpreter speaks to John and says "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."

It is at this moment that John actually sees the Lamb for the first time. The Lamb is standing between God and some heavenly creatures.

The Lamb is described as appearing to already have been slaughtered and having seven eyes and seven horns. Obvious symbols meaning perfect vision, and perfect strength horns, otherwise we have a really weird looking Lamb – one which the Bible would tell us is unfit for sacrifice...

The Lamb takes a hold of a scroll with seven seals, and begins to undo the seals, setting in motion that which will bring about the end of all things. Revelation is a vision about the end of the world, but it is not doom and gloom for the faithful, as they will be spared the various wraths of God by virtue of their faith. Rather, the faithful hearing this vision would have the same sense as those who listen to and sing along with REM's song "It's the end of the world as we know it, and I feel fine."

This passage I am about to read is part of an interlude between the opening of the sixth seal and the anticipated opening of the seventh seal.

Let us now hear a message from Revelation, the word of God:

7:9 After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands.

7:10 They cried out in a loud voice, saying, "Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!"

7:11 And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God,

7:12 singing, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen."

7:13 Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?"

7:14 I said to him, "Sir, you are the one that knows." Then he said to me, "These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

7:15 For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them.

7:16 They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat;

7:17 for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.

The word of God for the People of God, Thanks be to God.

That passage contains a wonderful and wonder-filled paradox, the Lamb as Shepherd. The Shepherd as Lamb. The Lamb will eternally watch over the flock of believers who have suffered so grievously.

Remember the final beatitude from Matthew 5, "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you." The multitude in this scene is made up of those who were and are still being persecuted on behalf of Christ.

The persecutions under Emperor Nero and Emperor Domitian were particularly gruesome. There is no shortage of accounts in the histories of the church describing the absolutely awful ways in which Christians were martyred. They include being burned, ripped apart by animals, and, of course, crucifixion. One account is that of Antipas of Pergamon. His death is mentioned in chapter 2 of Revelation, but church history has recorded his martyrdom in greater detail. Because Antipas would not renounce Jesus, he was roasted alive in a large sculpted oven of brass. Those who knew and loved Antipas would have struggled to understand and make meaning of his suffering and death, in the same way that some of us today struggle to understand and make meaning of the suffering and death of the hundreds of people in Sri Lanka in the Easter bombings.

In light of such suffering and violence, one might look prayerfully and angrily toward heaven and demand, as so many have done before and will again,

Hey Shepherd! They were faithful believers. Where is the green pasture? Where are the still waters? If you're the good shepherd, shouldn't you be laying down your life for these people? I'm a faithful believer and the world is a scary place. We've got wars, we've got addiction and disease, we have corruption, there are those for whom the deck is stacked against, there's no

shortage of widows and orphans, This world makes no sense. What are you going to do about it!?!? Amen

When we settle down and compose ourselves, we remind ourselves of the Lamb. The Lamb who is Shepherd. The Lamb who laid down his life, suffered, and died on the cross for us.

No matter how you have come to understand what exactly happened on the cross and the resurrection; and as good Congregationalists, we can agree and disagree. As Congregationalists called to come to our own understanding, we probably ought to have some disagreement. But we do know Jesus did something for us. Whether it was...

- Christ dying for our sins, because sin must be paid for by death.
- Christ defeating the very nature of sin, and we, as his followers, get to participate in the victory over sin
- Christ creating a new covenant in him replacing the old one covenant.
- Christ serving as an atoning sacrifice similar to the sin sacrifices in the temple.
- Christ heroically interposing himself between the cosmic forces which can claim us.
- Christ standing as intermediary and connecting the lowly sinner to the perfect God.
- Christ demonstrating the power of God's love and promise by fulfilling his promise in the resurrection providing faithful and faith-filled hope in all the other promises of God.

...or some other understanding. However you understand what happened at the cross and in Christ's Resurrection, we know the Lamb died for us.

John is providing a glimpse of what the faithful believers, those who place their faith in God and Jesus, ultimately may experience. John tells us about those who suffered and died on account of Jesus Christ. These saints are already with Jesus. They are already in the presence of God, where no harm can befall them, where they drink from the waters of life and all their tears are wiped away by God's gentle loving touch.

When we try to make sense of violence against the faithful, like the Easter bombings in Sri Lanka, we should mourn and be sad, and in that mourning even be angry. When we consider the horrors that the faithful have endured through the ages, we can be saddened by the evil, which humanity will undertake, the evil men do.

But there is cause for HOPE as the stories of persecution, violence, and death do not end with the faithful dying. No, rather the story continues, because our Shepherd has laid down his life for us, becoming the Lamb sacrificed out of love for the whole of the world, for people of every nation, language, and tribe. This vision of hope is only the beginning of the veil being removed by God. This Revelation is confirmation that persecution and death on earth is not the last word in our stories.

- When we hear bad news,
- When we hear about Christians around the world being persecuted,
- When we hear about churches being attacked and burned,
- When we hear about innocent lives being lost through senseless religiously motivated violence,

We don't retaliate. We turn the other cheek.

And we take comfort in our Good Shepherd who laid down his life for the flock, becoming the Lamb of God, The Lamb who loved us, loves us, and will always love us. The Lamb who is also the Good Shepherd, who has conquered death, will wipe away all our tears. The Lamb who, at the end of time, will gather the flock and march the saints into heaven, ultimately leading us to green pastures and still waters, restoring our souls, and letting us live in His house for all days. May we take comfort in the message from John of Patmos of hope, and promised salvation through our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Amen.