

Four of the Strangest Books of the Bible

II. Revelation

Texts: 2 Corinthians 12:6-10, Revelation 5:1-14

The Reverend Christopher A. Henry

Morningside Presbyterian Church

Atlanta, GA

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"Then I saw between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered..." Revelation 5:6a

When we were choosing which books to include as part of this sermon series on four of the strangest books in the Bible, there was no uncertainty or hesitation concerning Revelation's inclusion. The Revelation of John is almost universally considered the strangest and most bewildering document in the Bible. Even those dedicated souls who plow their way through the intricate Holiness Code in Leviticus and the seemingly endless list of unrighteous rulers in the books of First and Second Kings find themselves stopped short by Revelation.

I think it fair to say that many of us in the contemporary church find the Book of Revelation not only strange but at least a little frightening. Many of us have read or heard interpretations of the book as a roadmap for the end of the world. The *Left Behind* series of books is perhaps the most well known of these predictive interpretations of the text: everything that happens in the Biblical book corresponds to an event in the modern world—earthquakes, fires, terrorist attacks. For me, however, Revelation can be an unnerving read not because it explains the events of our time so well, but because it seems so distant from my life. Humans seem to have an instinctual fear of that which is unfamiliar and unknown, and Revelation certainly fits the bill. In addition to the strange descriptions of seven-headed beasts, long-tailed dragons, and six-winged seraphim, even the depiction of Christ seems distant: "His head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow; his eyes were like a flame of fire, his feet were like burnished bronze, refined as in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of many waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, and from his mouth came a sharp, two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining with full force" (Rev. 1:14-16) Now, I know that John meant this description to be comforting to his fellow Christians, but the picture in my mind is more than a little unsettling!

Still, despite all the strangeness of this book, and despite the great distance between these heavenly visions and our daily commute, there is a thread of consistency that runs unbroken from otherwordly visions to the streets of our city. The Christians in Ancient Rome, like the Christians in Modern Atlanta, were longing for a vision of truth from the God in whom they struggled to believe. Everything and everyone surrounding them seemed to have better and more complete answers to the challenges of the day. Many Christians had begun to participate openly in the life of the Roman Empire. And God seemed a silent supporter of the move. As one scholar writes, "They found themselves loyal to the Kingdom of Heaven on the one hand, but also deeply invested in the continued prosperity of the Kingdom of Rome on the other...they went to plays and the theater, rented movies from Blockbuster, and attended games at the coliseum, doing the tomahawk chant and

cheering on the Braves.”ⁱ But deep down, our faith ancestors knew that something was amiss. Though their leaders spoke of the “Pax Romana” (The Peace of Rome), they lived in the most violent country in the world. There was rampant inequality and persecution of minorities. Their crime rate was the highest in the world.

In moments of complete honesty, these believers would no doubt admit that lived with a great deal of ambivalence, churning in their stomachs. Sure they kept coming to Sunday services and praying before meals. Of course they raised their children in the Christian assembly and cared for the sick and poor believers. Outwardly, they remained faithful to God and to the church. But in this minority community in the overwhelmingly pagan empire, confidence in God’s power was surely growing thin. Our ancestors in faith needed a word from the Risen Christ, they needed a **vision** of the power and authority of God. Can you relate?

It is this vision that John provides to his fellow Christians in the cities of the Ancient Near East. He receives a word from God, and that word is inscribed on a scroll. God’s truth, God’s word to the all people, is written on that scroll. It is the answer to the lingering questions that hover in the Christian communities to whom John writes. A scroll, as my friend Robert Williamson has written, “revealing the meaning and purpose of life.”ⁱⁱ How thrilled John must have been!

But this is the strange book of Revelation where nothing comes easy, and so there must be a catch. The scroll is sealed shut with seven seals. And the seals may only be opened by one who is worthy to know the truth. Who can open it? Who is worthy? Who in our world speaks the deepest truth? Could the emperor in Rome or the great Greek philosophers or the heroes of the famed Roman military? John tells us that the answer is no. No one in heaven or on earth can open the scroll. No one living and no one who has ever lived. The deepest, life-giving, powerful truth written on the scroll is inaccessible. And John begins to weep. He weeps with the passion of one who has come to the end of a long search and is left empty-handed. He weeps the way you or I do when we wake in the middle of the night having come to the conclusion that there simply is no answer. That the pain is too great to move on, that the relationship is too broken to reconcile. He weeps with those who believe that this life is devoid of meaning. He weeps over a world that is cruel and indifferent. He weeps with all of us, we who know the devastating feeling of despair.

But before he can turn to walk away hopeless, a voice calls out. “Do not weep, the Lion of the tribe of Judah can open the scroll.” There is one who can open the scroll! The mighty warrior! The powerful lion! The conquering hero! John turns to catch a glimpse of power personified. He looks up toward the heavens for the mighty one descending. He looks across the landscape for the eyes of fire, the feet of burnished bronze. He listens for the voice like the boom of rushing waters. Instead, what John sees, what he can barely see because of its diminutive size, is a slaughtered lamb. And it is this lamb, this weak, frail, feeble, delicate creature, who takes the scroll, to the great joy and praise of the elders and angels.

This is the one who is worthy to open the scroll? **This** is the one for whom we have been waiting and hoping? **This** is the way God aims to save a broken and hurting world? **This** is God’s response to the clamor and power of Rome? **A slaughtered lamb?** **A crucified**

Lord? It's, well, it's an embarrassment. Slaughtered lambs don't draw crowds or fill the pews. Mighty warriors do! This is no way to start a movement.

In his book *Narratives of a Vulnerable God*, William Placher describes the surprise and disappointment that Jews and Gentiles alike would have felt at this dramatic moment in the vision. "In the Hellenistic world," he writes, "it was powerful heroes and mighty emperors who were deified"..."many among Jesus' Jewish contemporaries understandably hoped for a triumphant Messiah who would defeat the hated Romans." Both groups "could only find this crucified teacher a disappointment, if they took him seriously at all. The first century, like the (twenty-first), expected deity to triumph through power. But suppose God is not like that. Suppose God, more than anything else, freely loves, and is willing to be vulnerable and risk suffering."ⁱⁱⁱ

According to John's Revelation, it is the slaughtered lamb who reveals the deepest truth to the world. It is a crucified savior who deserves our worship and praise. Only the suffering God redeems the world.

God's power is not to be found only the throne, but most deeply on the cross. If we forget that basic and profound truth, if we take down our crosses out of embarrassment or in hopes of broader appeal, then we deny what is at the heart of who we are. In weakness, God's strength is revealed to us.

We at Morningside know the power of God that comes to us when we are at our weakest. We know the meaning of resurrection and we know that strength comes when we admit our human limitations and lean into the power of God. We know what it is to worship the slaughtered lamb, the one who goes all the way with us in the vulnerability of unconditional love.

The power of weakness. I think of the nineteen-member Warrenton Presbyterian Church in northern North Carolina. Each Sunday, Sunday school and worship are held. Sometimes, due to illness and age, fewer than ten people are present for the morning worship service. Still, the people gathered worship God, sing hymns, and read the ancient words of scripture. By the standards of the world, what could be weaker? The church should close its doors, save the time and energy, do something more productive. And yet in that church I have felt the power of God, made perfect in weakness. I have seen God at work in the life of this unassuming congregation. Lives have been transformed utterly, the community has been brought together, the orphan and the widow have been taken in and given a seat at the head of the table. The lamb, the crucified savior has been worshipped and served. It was as part of this congregation that I felt the call to ministry and I owe much to the strength of their weakness.

This weekend, as we give thanks for our nation and the freedoms that we enjoy, I also give thanks for the theologically-informed insight of our founding ancestors. That insight, borrowed from Reformed Theology and a cornerstone of Presbyterian belief, is that no person can be trusted with too much power. This is certainly a political truth, but for we Christians it runs far deeper than that. We cannot be trusted with power not because it is impractical, but because we are human. Unable to grasp the truth of John's vision, we will

go for the lion over the lamb every time. As one theologian has written, "Sheer power is not merely neutral. It is in itself evil."^{iv} This is as true of human power as it is of divine power. Those who fled to this country to escape religious persecution knew the terror of absolute power. What we ought to remember and admire about them is their deep understanding of the limits of humanity and their appreciation of the dangers of power. May we never lose sight of this truth, that we worship a God who risked vulnerable love for a world in need of redemption.

In just a moment, we will all be invited to share a meal with one another. The host of our table is none other than the crucified Savior, the lamb who was slaughtered. And at this table, transformation will take place. The bread and the juice will not be transformed, but you and I will be. At this table, where anything is possible, the Lamb is mightier than the Lion.

It seems utter foolishness to those who favor reasoned logic. It seems embarrassing weakness to those who privilege displays of power. We will share a meal with the one who also shares our humanity. So when you approach this feast, bring it all with you. The frustration and isolation, the lingering doubts and open sores, the pain you have felt or caused. Bring all your weakness and vulnerability. For it is here, at this table, that you will receive true strength for the days ahead.

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

ⁱ Robert Williamson, "Who Is Worthy to Open the Scroll?" *Journal for Preachers*, Pentecost 2008, 49-53.

ⁱⁱ Williamson, 51.

ⁱⁱⁱ William C. Placher, *Narratives of Vulnerable God: Christ, Theology, and Scripture*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 9-11.

^{iv} Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 2/1 trans. T.H.L. Parker et al. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957), 524.