

**“A Pastoral Kingdom”**  
**Text: Revelation 7:9-17**  
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*For the lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd...  
Revelation 7:17a*

If there is one point of agreement among Christians of every stripe concerning the Biblical book we call Revelation, it is this: Revelation is a book of visions. It is filled with vivid metaphors and striking images designed to grab hold of its audience. There are dragons, a seven-headed beast, and one that looks like a leopard, except that it has the feet of a bear, the mouth of a lion, and huge horns. To their original audience, Christians living in cities that belonged to the Roman empire, these creatures would have signified great power, strength, and dominion. These are the hallmarks of Empire, and the marginalized and ostracized churches on the outskirts of the Roman world knew them quite well. They lived in constant fear of these terrible dragons. The dragon of forced imperial worship. The two-headed beast of persecution and torture.

But there is a vision of another creature that keeps stubbornly showing up in the book of Revelation. This creature is not a symbol of power but of weakness, not a signifier of domination but of submission. Over and over again in the book of Revelation, the vision of John returns to the image of a lam seated on a throne. Competing with dragons and multi-headed beasts, the lamb is, to say the least, a strange choice for the occupant of a mighty throne. And yet, as John describes it, the lamb is at the center of all that happens in his heavenly vision. Around the lamb mortals and angels stand day and night singing hymns of praise and gratitude; they bow down before the lamb in humble adoration. Even as the dragons and wild beasts swirl about overhead, the attention of the faithful is unyieldingly focused on the lamb.

Though hidden from the Romans, the identity of this royal lamb would have been unmistakable to our faith ancestors. The lamb who is positioned awkwardly on the throne is the one whom they have come to believe is the Messiah and the Son of God. The lamb is the one whom they call Lord.

It began far from Rome, by the river Jordan, where another John came preaching and baptizing. One day, on the banks of the river, he saw Jesus coming toward him and he shouted: “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.” The Lamb of God. It was a title that would stick with him, and a symbol that would come to define his life and death.

In Revelation, where images are everything, the terrifying dragons and beasts define life as it is now: harsh, dangerous, frightening. The vulnerable lamb is a promise of how it will all turn out: the Lamb of God securely on the throne, all of creation in awe, worshipping with one voice. The painful present no match for an undeniably promise-filled future.

One of the requirements of a summer chaplaincy internship at Metro State Women's Prison in south Atlanta is preaching at one of the Sunday evening chapel services. In the summer of 2007, I was volunteered to go first. Having never been to the chapel service, I asked a few of the inmates with whom I was working most closely to describe the type of preaching that was most appropriate and appreciated. "Don't worry about it, Chap," one of the women confidently responded, "If we aren't getting what we need, we'll let you know." Having done most of my preaching in Presbyterian congregations where, if you aren't getting what you need, you politely nod and smile, my anxiety level went through the roof! But another of the inmates came to my rescue with these words, "Listen. We don't need to be reminded of everything that is going wrong in here. We know life is tough; we all live it every day. We know people suffer. We know how painful the world can be and how sinful we can be. Give us the promises of God that a better day is coming."

A better day is coming. Despite the arrogant pontifications of self-proclaimed modern day prophets to the contrary, hope is the message of the book of Revelation. John envisions a future of hope and peace and security when the lamb will be king. No hunger or thirst, no tears or subjugation. A time when the kingdom will be pastoral. And especially on this Sunday, I mean that term in its multiplicity of connotations. The first two definitions to show up on my handy Macbook dictionary were these, number one: used for or related to the keeping or grazing of sheep or cattle. And number two: concerning or appropriate to the giving of spiritual guidance. It is a pastoral pastoral kingdom of which John writes. The whole kingdom is ruled by the lamb.

But the lamb is not only a distantly sovereign monarch, according to John's divine vision. Tucked away in the midst of the heavenly description is this phrase: "for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd." The lamb will be the shepherd. Now, before we begin accusing John of mixing metaphors, consider the task that he is about: interpreting and proclaiming a kingdom of dramatic and unthinkable reversals. The weak will be strong. The powerless will be powerful. The meek will inherit the earth. The persecuted ones will be given the kingdom of God. And, according to John, the sheep will be the shepherd. What could be more counterintuitive than that?

And yet, it is precisely how the gospel message seems to work. There is a kingdom, John writes, that is more powerful and eternal than any of us could imagine. But we've been looking for it in all the wrong places. Take your eyes off the palace and halls of power and domination. Do not look to the imperial fortress for the coming kingdom of God. Instead, head out to the fields. Go to the places of least pretense and most authenticity. The kingdom of God is a pastoral kingdom.

Where have you encountered the pastoral kingdom at work in the world? Where have you seen the power of love triumph over the love of power?

For me, it comes most palpably in the community of faith. When I read John's vision of the throne of God, my eyes turn to that great multitude that no one could count. They come from every nation and tribe and people and language. They also come from heaven itself, as angels and elders and all living creatures fall on their faces and worship God.

The sign of the kingdom is an innumerable multitude in worship, transformed by the presence of God and of one another. Transformation that comes in the human-to-human connections that are also points of divine encounter. When a group becomes a community. When an organization becomes a church. When two acquaintances become chosen family members. When one who was labeled “sinner” becomes sister or brother in Christ. I had a glimpse of the pastoral kingdom last Sunday morning in this sanctuary as two beautiful and precious children were sealed with the promises of God by the waters of baptism, and as we welcomed new members into this community of faith. In those moments, when we are all asked to make promises and commit ourselves anew to Jesus Christ, to the mission of the church, and to one another, I feel the pastoral kingdom breaking in with the hope a better day is truly coming for all of us. One of my favorite theologians, John Howard Yoder, once wrote that, “It is those who bear crosses who are working with the grain of the universe.”<sup>1</sup> A better day is coming.

In fact, if we only have eyes to see it, the kingdom of God is breaking in all around us in unexpected and astounding ways. Perhaps you think I am being naïve, and perhaps I am. Perhaps John was being naïve when he envisioned the lamb on a throne and the power of evil defeated in the world. Surely he was discouraged by all that he saw surrounding him, just as you and I are. Surely he was beaten down by the news of persecuted Christians and dwindling churches. Surely he had moments, maybe even days or weeks, of doubt and uncertainty about the future that he so boldly promised and envisioned. We may all be forgiven for failing to bear all the weight of belief all of the time by ourselves.

When I can't bear it all, here's what I do. I rely on you, on my community of faith. The church is the surest sign of the coming kingdom not because it is perfect but because it is well acquainted with imperfection and yet held together by the bonds of faith and hope and love. The church is the most powerful force in the world not because it is wealthy or influential but because it works with the grain of the universe. The church is capable of changing the world because, at our best, we know who sits on the throne and we gather together and bow down and sing hymns of praise and gratitude, and envision a better day coming and live our lives as if it were already here. The church, though cloudy, unfocused, slightly off-centered, is picture of the pastoral kingdom.

When he published a volume of his most memorable and poignant stories, the great preacher Fred Craddock chose to begin the book with this personal account:

My mother took us to church and Sunday school; my father didn't go. He complained about Sunday dinner being late when she came home. Sometimes the preacher would call, and my father would say, ‘I know what the church wants. Church doesn't care about me. Church wants another name, another pledge, another name, another pledge. Right? Isn't that the name of it? Another name, another pledge.’ That's what he always said.

Sometimes we'd have a revival. Pastor would bring the evangelist and say to the evangelist, ‘There's one now, sic him, get him, get him,’ and my father would say the same thing. Every time, my mother in the kitchen, always nervous, in fear of flaring tempers, of somebody being

hurt. And always my father said, 'The church doesn't care about me. The church wants another name and another pledge.' I guess I heard it a thousand times.

One time he didn't say it. He was in the veteran's hospital, and he was down to seventy-three pounds. They'd taken out his throat and said, 'It's too late.' They put in a metal tube and x-rays burned him to pieces. I flew in to see him. He couldn't speak, couldn't eat. I looked around the room, potted plants and cut flowers on all the windowsills, a stay of cards twenty inches deep beside his bed. And even that tray where they put the food, if you can eat, on that was a flower. And all the flowers beside the bed, every card, every blossom, were from persons or groups from the church.

He gave me a card to read. He could not speak, so he took a Kleenex box and wrote on the side of it a line from Shakespeare. If he had not written that line, I would not tell you this story. He wrote, 'In this harsh world, draw your breath in pain to tell my story.' I said, 'What's your story, Daddy?' And he wrote, 'I was wrong.'<sup>2</sup>

The kingdom of God has not yet come on earth as it is in heaven. Even in this season of Eastertide, we know and we experience the harshness of life in an imperfect world. Loved ones do get sick and suffer, natural disasters do strike, people in our city and all over the globe do go without home and food and love. All of us deal with the frustrations and disappointments and pain of living in the "not yet." But here, in the church, and in our lives of faith, we can catch glimpses of how it will one day be—when there will be hunger and thirst, when all will be sheltered by the throne of God, when weeping eyes will be dried and all of this groaning creation will be led to the springs of the water of life and **no one** will be pushed aside and kept away. We do see glimpses on this journey of discipleship.

And, in the distance, beckoning us on toward the fullness of that kingdom, we see the Lamb who is the shepherd, leading us beside still waters and in paths of righteousness, walking beside us in the valleys of darkness and death, comforting us in moments of fear and uncertainty. And, when we see him, we can clear wearied throats and we can say together what we know to be true: the Lord is my shepherd. Thanks be to God.

<sup>1</sup> John Howard Yoder, "Armaments and Eschatology," *Studies in Christian Ethics*, 1988: 58.

<sup>2</sup> Fred B. Craddock, *Craddock Stories*, Chalice Press, 2001: 14.