

Easter 3C
Revelation II

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Then I saw in the right hand of the one seated on the throne a scroll written on the inside and on the back, sealed with seven seals; and I saw a mighty angel proclaiming with a loud voice, 'Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?' And no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or to look into it. And I began to weep bitterly because no one was found worthy to open the scroll or to look into it. Then one of the elders said to me, '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.'

Then I saw between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. He went and took the scroll from the right hand of the one who was seated on the throne. When he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell before the Lamb, each holding a harp and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. They sing a new song:

'You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God saints from every tribe and language and people and nation; you have made them to be a kingdom and priests serving our God, and they will reign on earth.'

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, singing with full voice,

'Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honour and glory and blessing!'

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 honour and glory and might for ever and ever!'

And the four living creatures said, 'Amen!' And the elders fell down and worshipped.

I find as I age that I appreciate all of my senses in new ways. Smells and tastes evoke memories of the past: favorite foods bring to mind celebrations; smells signal the change of seasons. Touch becomes increasingly important as it connects me to those I love with hugs and handshakes and holding babies! But the senses that seem the most capricious, most likely to raise questions in my mind are the senses of sight and of hearing.

I moved into bifocals many years ago when the words on the page were no longer so clear and looking up caused turmoil in my brain as my eyes took time adjusting to the distance. Recently I have noticed that I ask people to repeat themselves more often, especially when there is a lot of background noise. Those of you who have senses that are to some degree impaired will sympathize with the adaptations one makes under such circumstances. I have learned at just what distance I need to hold each size of print. I know which way to turn my head in order to hear things just a bit more clearly. I also know that I have little to complain about right now and a long road ahead where sight and hearing will require additional adaptations. Alas, while I am happy to be given the great gift of a 50th birthday, I do lament my all too swiftly passing youth and its sensory attributes!

In the fifth chapter of Revelation, John calls on the tricks and talents of our senses. John finds himself before the throne of God. He wonders at all that he sees and hears there. But seeing and hearing don't always align. Let's take a look.

John sees, in the right hand of God, a scroll. This scroll, like any other legal document of its time, would be understood by John's readers to symbolize the will and intent of its writer because it bears the writer's seal. The writer in this case is God. Such a scroll could only be opened by someone with the proper authority. But after searching heaven and earth and under the earth, there is no one who can open it. No wonder John weeps and weeps. Imagine: here before John's eyes is the written intent and will of God ready to be discovered. But there is not one who can open it.

Then John hears. He hears an elder say to him: "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." The elder recalls the language of prophetic promises about an anointed king of the lineage of David that will come: a Lion, the symbol of strength and might.

Then John sees. But instead of a Lion, he sees a Lamb: a Lamb standing as though slaughtered, with the mark of death still on him. Here is the one worthy to take the scroll from the right hand of God and reveal God's will to the nations.

Expectations are turned upside down. Seeing and hearing don't align. The people have been expecting a warrior king, a Lion who conquers by inflicting death. Instead, the one worthy of revealing the will of God is a Lamb, a symbol of meekness and humility, one who conquered by enduring death.

In writing to the seven churches in Asia Minor, John gets back to basics. Regardless of the particular challenges they each face, be it persecution, complacency or assimilation- John writes to encourage them by telling them once more the amazing truth about Jesus Christ and what was accomplished through the Lamb who was slain, the astonishing Savior King who did not come as one expected.

John will use the image of Lamb for Jesus Christ 27 more times in this letter. In doing so John highlights the sacrificial role of Jesus Christ in our salvation. But Jesus is no ordinary sacrificial lamb, meek and mild. In Revelation, the number 7 is the symbol of wholeness and completeness. This Lamb has 7 horns, signifying fullness of power and this Lamb has 7 eyes, signifying fullness of vision and insight. This is Lamb has all the attributes of the expected king.

As we move on, John again sees. As the Lamb takes the scroll from God, the living creatures and the elders fall before the Lamb in full worship. Not only is this Lamb a king of authority and power and wisdom. This Lamb is accorded the worship once reserved only for God. But this Lamb is no usurper. This Lamb does not displace God, but by his life, has served God's holy purpose and is accorded equal praise.

We see this theme picked up again in the song that is sung by the myriads of angels. John looks and hears the innumerable multitudes singing: "Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered, worthy is Christ the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing." This Lamb is worshipped and glorified as king and as God. Then every creature in heaven and earth and under the earth all join in this cosmic expression of praise, singing: "Blessing, honor, glory and might to the Lamb, forever and ever."

John reassures the churches through this beautiful revelation that this is indeed the one that had long been promised by God. In Exodus, after the Passover when the people of God have been ransomed from Pharaoh by the blood of the Lamb, God tells Moses that the newly free people will be a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. John calls to mind these images of Passover when the elders proclaim that this Lamb has ransomed for God saints from every tribe and language and people and nation. The Lamb pays the price of his life to set the people free, making them a kingdom and priests serving God.

John is not describing what will be. The word apocalypse comes from a Greek word that means "to reveal." John is revealing to the seven churches that they are already part of this priestly kingdom and now join in the cosmic song of praise to God and the Lamb. John describes or reveals what has already been accomplished in Jesus Christ.

As we lift up these now familiar hymns from chapter 5 it is important to note that for John, it is not just the words of the songs that matter. By the very act of singing the churches are no longer observers. They are participants.

Some of our youth will tell you that I have either complemented them for being caught actually singing in church or nagged them a little because they don't sing in church. Singing matters because singing draws us into participation with all of God's people. When we sing, we are no longer impotent observers. Instead we participate with all creation in a distinct and particular way. This was part of the message that John was trying to get across way back then, and it is a timeless truth that still speaks to us today. We, as a priestly kingdom ransomed by the Lamb, are invited into the cosmic song of praise to this Lamb, this King. Contrary to popular belief, Revelation is not a book of exclusion but paints a picture of radical, extravagant inclusion. Joining in the hymn of praise are "many angels...living creatures and the elders numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands...every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea and all that is in them." We are participants in a choir of cosmic proportions.

Chapter five of Revelation is a scene of worship. This letter is meant to be read in the context of a congregation gathered for worship...just as we read Scripture now. What John highlights for the seven churches also remains true for us today. By joining in this cosmic worship we participate in the past (by being part of all of creation) and the future by trusting and hoping in God's ultimate victory.

John draws the seven churches and us into cosmic worship by demonstrating God's eternal faithfulness to his people. The promises of God through the prophets have been fulfilled in their sight and in their hearing. God has fulfilled the promise to send a powerful and righteous ruler. Not a ruler who subjugates and enslaves his people. But rather a ruler that creates a new relationship with God for all people.

We will learn as the seals are broken that all is not entirely good news. But throughout Revelation John will continue to underscore for us God's presence with us in all things, God's faithfulness to his promises and the redemption we are swept up in through the blood of the Lamb. This too is a timeless truth. Amen.