

Revelation 5 (NRSV)

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; ²and I saw a mighty angel proclaiming with a loud voice, “Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?” ³And no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or to look into it. ⁴And I began to weep bitterly because no one was found worthy to open the scroll or to look into it. ⁵Then 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.”

⁶Then 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. ⁷He went and took the scroll from the right hand of the one who was seated on the throne. ⁸When 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. ⁹They 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;
¹⁰you have made them to be a kingdom and priests serving our God,
and they will reign on earth.”

¹¹Then 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, ¹²singing 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!”

¹³Then 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!”

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

Who is it that we worship? How would you describe Jesus Christ and his relationship to God and to the cosmos . . . and to us?

A quick review: John writes that he has been given the revelation of Jesus Christ, which is to be heard and kept. John’s first vision is of an awe-inspiring Jesus, whose mouth is the sword of truth. Jesus has letters for seven churches, who represent the church universal. These are churches in western Asia Minor in the vicinity of Ephesus.

The throne room of God

Then, in chapter 4, John is whisked away to the heavens, to the very throne room of God. The image of the ancient one is like that of precious stones and he is surrounded by an emerald-like rainbow, as in Ezekiel 1:26-28.¹ Around the throne, John sees twenty-four other thrones on which are seated twenty-four elders. It is hard to be sure of the significance of twenty-four, though the simplest and probably best explanation is that the twenty-four elders represent the twelve tribes of Israel and the twelve apostles.

The Jews were not a sea-faring people. In their apocalyptic writings, the sea was always a symbol of chaos and terror, the birthplace of monsters (see Daniel 7). But, here, around the throne of God, the sea is calm – there is no chaos.

From the throne emanate power and might, as thunder rolls amidst lightning. In front of the throne are seven torches representing the seven archangels who stand before the throne of God (also 1:4, 3:1, 5:6, 8:2, and even Luke 1:19!). Also in front of the throne is what John describes as a sea that is as calm as glass.

¹Revelation is very dependent on the Old Testament, and I’ll include a few references as we go along. It is natural that John would follow the prophets’ descriptions of their visions as he attempts to put his own experiences into words.

Also around the throne are four living creatures. They have eyes in front and behind, signifying that they see everything and guard the throne. These creatures are cherubim (plural of “cherub”).² This image again draws on Ezekiel, this time 1:10, where there are four cherubim, though each has four faces. Here, the four faces (human, lion, ox, and eagle) are the same but each cherub has only one face. All four cherubim have six wings (Isaiah 6:2). The four faces of the cherubim are meant to represent the entire created order, which becomes evident when their Amen awaits the joining in of all creation (5:13-14).³

Worship

And what are the creatures and the elders doing? They are worshipping. The cherubim sing praises to God’s holiness – without ceasing, as if they had been created for this sole purpose. The elders fall on the ground in their worship, casting their crowns before the throne. Before this scene closes, all of creation joins in the worship of the Creator.

By the end of the second century, Christians were using the four faces of the cherubim in their writing and art to symbolize the writers of the four gospels. The human face symbolized Matthew because he begins his gospel with a genealogy. Mark was the lion because his opening reference to Jesus as “Son of God” speaks of power and strength. Luke was the ox because he begins his gospel in the temple, where oxen were sometimes sacrificed. John was the eagle because his opening with Jesus as “the Word” points to Jesus’ heavenly origins. In the ancient understanding of the cosmos, the heavens were “up there.”¹

From Koester’s, *Revelation and the End of All Things*.

Often, when we come to Revelation we are anxious to race on to the mysterious and scary scenes of beasts and destruction and special numbers. But the book is built around several dramatic and lengthy scenes of worship. They are the book’s center. Indeed, chapters 4 and 5 are the heart of the Revelation given to John, not the endlessly fascinating four horsemen of the apocalypse, though we’ll get to them next week.

The lion and the lamb

Yet, amidst this worship there is soon mourning and tears. The one on the throne holds a scroll that, unlike most papyri, is written on front and back. It is sealed with seven seals, which signifies that the seal is completely and utterly closed, for seven is the number of completion and totality. What does the scroll contain? We are not told. It could be God’s plan for creation or it could be the rest of the book. Whatever the scroll contains, there is no one, in all the heavens and the earth, who is worthy to open it and John weeps because the scroll will remain closed. . . . Or might there be someone who is worthy?

One of the twenty-four elders comes to John and tells him that the Lion of Judah is worthy to open the scroll. Thus, we’d expect that John would turn to see a lion, the symbol of power and strength, standing ready to open the scroll.

The “Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered” calls on two key Old Testament images. The first is the Passover lamb, whose blood was spread on the doorway of the Hebrews so that the death of the firstborn would pass them by (Exodus 12). Of course, Jesus’ last meal with his disciples was a Passover meal reshaped around Jesus’ body and blood, representing a New Exodus. But the image of the Lamb here also evokes Isaiah 53, the story of the suffering servant who would take upon himself the iniquities of us all. A Christian could scarcely read Isaiah 53 and not see in it the story of Jesus’ sacrifice.

Yet, when John turns, he doesn’t see a lion at all. He sees a lamb. But not a cute, white, leaping little lamb. John sees a Lamb standing there as if it had been slaughtered! This is such a powerful moment in Revelation. John *hears* “Lion” but *sees* “Lamb.” The contrast couldn’t be more striking.

We think we know what power and might are, but Jesus Christ has revealed that the truth is far from our expectation. It is the Lamb who conquers. Craig Koester writes, “What John *hears* about the Lion recalls promises from the Old Testament, and what he *sees* in the lamb reflects the crucifixion of Christ. Both images point to the same reality. According to the Old Testament, God promised to send a powerful and righteous

²This is pretty far removed from the way that we’ve come to think of cherubs, the fat little winged angels often equipped with a bow and arrow.

³David Aune’s three-volume commentary on Revelation in the *Word Biblical Commentary* is a big help in sorting through the symbolism. He also wrote the Revelation study notes in the Harper-Collins study Bible. A competent guide to the symbols can take away much of the mystery, just as people 2,000 years from now will need a guide to sort through the symbolism from our own time. Who then will associate a cherry tree with truth-telling?

ruler. These promises are not rejected but fulfilled through the slaughtered yet living Lamb, who is not a hapless victim but a figure of royal strength.”

And strong the Lamb certainly is. The Lamb has seven eyes, all-seeing and all-present (see Zechariah 4:10), and seven horns, all-powerful, as horns were ancient symbols of kingly power. In Revelation, there are twenty-eight references to the exalted Lamb. It is the victorious Lamb of God from the end of the book who stands at the center of our Rose Window.

The Lamb then takes the scroll from the hand of God, causing all the elders and cherubim to fall down before the Lamb in worship, singing their acknowledgement that the Lamb, and the Lamb alone, is worthy to open the scroll.

Then angels too numerous to count join the elders and the cherubim in their worship of the Lamb. The crescendo presses forward as all the creatures of all the cosmos join in the praise of the one seated on the throne and of the Lamb. Finally, the four living creatures say “Amen!”

How cold a heart it would be that could be unmoved by this scene! Imagine for a moment that you are a Christian who is being persecuted. What would these words say to you? Who is really in control of this world? To whom should every knee bow and tongue confess? Would this not encourage you to persevere and to trust that God and the Lamb will be victorious over the powers that persecute you, even if it doesn't always seem that way. It is as if the curtains of heaven have been pulled back, revealing to you the truth of what is and who is. We shouldn't be surprised that it is this scene around which Handel composed the glorious final chorus in his *Messiah*.

Next Week: The Four Horsemen

The throne room scene of Chapters 4 and 5 continues next week as the Lamb begins to break the seals of the scroll. As the first four seals are broken, four horsemen come riding out in succession, each bearing a new horror.

As you read through the opening of the first seal and then the rest, the question to ask yourself is this: “What is the point of it all? What message is God sending us in this dramatic and terrifying imagery?”

It can't be about scaring people into loving Jesus. Even God couldn't do that. Try it yourself. Could you scare someone into loving you? Oh, you might be able to scare them into saying “I love you” or even acting like they do. But you know it wouldn't be the real deal, just like you know you couldn't bribe someone into truly loving you. For love to be love it has to be freely given, or it isn't love.

So if the point isn't to scare us into loving God, then what is the point?

READING WITH HEART & MIND, SEPTEMBER 16 - 22

Sunday, Revelation 5 Look back over the depiction of the Lamb and the words of praise offered to him. What does this say to you about Jesus and his vocation? Why have these proved to be such powerful images in the life of the Church?

Monday, Revelation 6 As the seals are opened, horsemen come riding out bringing terror and destruction to the earth. What purpose could be served by these images? What message from God is there in this? Remember – “love me or else” as the answer doesn't really work.

Tuesday, Revelation 7 Who do you think are represented by these 144,000. Note that the number is equal to $12 \times 12 \times 1000$. Is that a clue to the number's meaning? Just as John *heard* the Lion and *saw* the Lamb, John hears the 144,000 and sees the great multitude. What might that tell us about this image?

Wednesday, Revelation 8-9 We go from seals to trumpets and the horrors compound. But this is not linear, i.e., sequential. For example, all the grass is burned up in 8:7. Then, the locusts(!) are told not to damage the grass of the earth. Again, the question is, “What is the point of all this?” If even God can't scare someone into loving him, might this be about scaring people into repentance – into recognizing that they've been headed in the wrong direction, an “intervention” of sorts.

Thursday, Revelation 10 As the terrors seem about to climax, an angel descends from heaven. What purpose is served by this angel's announcement?

Friday, Revelation 11:1-14 The temple here is the people of God, in keeping with Paul's letters. What you can't miss here is the very end of 11:13. Finally!! After all that came before, at last there are some who repent and give glory to God.

Saturday, Revelation 11:15-19 Following the repentance of 11:13, we return to the heavens and another worship scene. In some ways, the book could end here . . . but it doesn't.

Sermon Notes

www.thebibleacademy.com

Registration for the Fall 2007 Bible Academy session is now open. We are offering daytime and evening classes as well as two one-day Saturday workshops. There is something for everyone this fall and we hope that you'll make plans now to be a part of it. Most classes will begin the week of September 24. Brochures for the fall session are have been mailed to homes and are available around the church.

Scott Engle's Sunday morning class, *Something More*, is now meeting in Festival Hall at 11am. We hope that you'll join us!

Because Scott is now preaching in the 9:30 service each week, his Sunday class is moving to 11am in Festival Hall. If you are not a part of a Sunday morning class, we hope that you'll visit our class. It is open to adults of all ages and focuses on a deeper understanding of Scripture. Whether you are new to St. Andrew or just visiting, the class is a great way to begin getting connected. If you have questions, you are welcome to call Scott at 214-291-8009 or e-mail him at sengle@thebibleacademy.com.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Today's Scripture passage is centered upon a dramatic worship scene. What do you think constitutes the worship of God? Is it more than what happens in a worship service? If so, how would you describe it to someone? Why do you think that so many Christians fail to make worship attendance a priority?
2. In what types of worship services have you participated? How would you describe them? How did they differ? What did they have in common? Which components of a worship service are most meaningful to you? What might this worship scene from Revelation have to say about our worship practices? Among the elders, the cherubim, the angels, and all the creatures of the cosmos, where would you find your place? What are your roles and responsibilities in the worship of God?
3. The Lion and the Lamb. Look back over your own life with Jesus, from childhood to now. Which image, Lion or Lamb, best embodies your own image of Jesus? What do you think each of these images is trying to convey to us about Christ? Which seems to be paramount? Why do you think this is? You might take a few minutes to read Isaiah 53 and come back to these questions.
4. I've said this book was written to comfort and encourage persecuted Christians. Do you think that this scene does so? If your answer is "yes," then how would you help another Christian to experience that same encouragement from this passage?