God Entrusts the Future to Jesus

Revelation 5:1-14 (NRSV)

1 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; 2 and I saw a mighty angel proclaiming with a loud voice, "Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?" 3 And no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or to look into it. 4 And I began to weep bitterly because no one was found worthy to open the scroll or to look into it. 5 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." 6 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. 7 He went and took the scroll from the right hand of the one who was seated on the throne. 8 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. 9 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; 10 you have made them to be a kingdom and priests serving our God, and they will reign on earth."

11 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, 12 singing 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!"

13 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 honor and glory and might forever and ever!" 14

And the four living creatures said, "Amen!" And the elders fell down and worshiped.

†

Today, we have read the Revelation of John. Some call this book “Revelations” because there are multiple scenes in it. Its title, however, is simply “Revelation” meaning God’s revealed will for the world. A friend of mine said that the message of Revelation is simply that “God wins”. We can expand that to say “love wins”, “humanity and creation wins”, “reconciliation wins”. The unsaid part of those very brief summaries is that sin and death, division and evil are forever defeated.

Revelation is a pastoral letter that the author, John of Patmos, wrote. John reports that he was given a vision of what must take place. His vision or revelation was intended to be a comfort, an encouragement (and a loving challenge) to Christians who were facing persecution for their faith.[[1]](#footnote-1) We read references to that persecution when John identified a martyred disciple named Antipas[[2]](#footnote-2). Also, John said that he shares in the persecution and that himself was an exile on the island of Patmos.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Eugene Peterson refers to the Revelation of John as a work of immense imagination. Imagination not originating from John’s creative abilities, as Eugene O’Neil wrote creative plays, but imagination in writing what he had seen as he had been commanded to do.[[4]](#footnote-4) If the Revelation is a work of intense imagination, it requires our thoughtful imagination in reading it. There are strange scenes with odd creatures, but, with the help of a good study Bible, much of what John describes can be understood.

Counter to ways that some in our day mistakenly decipher this book as written just for our lifetime, it was written to first century and early second century Christians. Just as Paul wrote to his contemporaries so John wrote to the 7 churches in Asia. And just as Paul’s letters have implications for our faith and for how we live our faith so the Revelation has implications for us as well…as I hope we will see today.

While the scenes and images John describes seem odd to us, they are of a form of writing called “apocalypse”. Apocalypse means “revelation” or “unveiling” and it was an understood form among John’s contemporaries.

Think for a moment…in our time a cartoon with a donkey and an elephant debating national policy are not thought to be two animals which miraculously talk, but the representation of two political parties debating policy. In a similar way when a television character says “Beam me up, Scotty” we know that he it is not describing an actual event. Rather he is a fictional character in an imaginary genre called science fiction. So too with apocalyptic literature. The people of John’s day would have understood the apocalyptic genre.

That is supported by other examples of apocalyptic writing in Scripture: the Old Testament book of Daniel, and the New Testament books of Matthew 24-25, Mark 13, Luke 21, 1 Thessalonians 4 and 1 Corinthians 15.

So much of John’s vision comes from our Old Testament and reflects the witness of our New Testament that Eugene Peterson writes

I do not read the Revelation to get additional information about the life of faith in Christ. I have read it all before in law and prophet, in gospel and epistle. Everything in the Revelation can be found in the previous sixty-five books of the Bible. The Revelation adds nothing of substance to what we already know. The truth of the gospel is already complete, revealed in Jesus Christ. There is nothing new to say on the subject. But there is a new way to say it. I read the Revelation not to get more information but to revive my imagination.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Peterson continues,

St. John uses words the way poets do, recombining them in fresh ways so that old truth is freshly perceived. He takes truth that has been eroded to platitude by careless usage and sets it in motion before us in an “animated and impassioned dance of ideas”.[[6]](#footnote-6)

†

This pastoral letter of Revelation begins with John describing himself as being “in the Spirit” or in a prophetic visionary trance.[[7]](#footnote-7) In the Spirit John saw heaven with God seated on the heavenly throne. Characteristic with Jewish tradition God’s name is not pronounced; rather John referred to God descriptively as “the one who was seated on the throne”.

To people who felt the power and the pinch of Roman rule and rejection by Roman citizens, this revelation made a profound statement that the ultimate authority was not Caesar, nor Roman society, but the Lord God Almighty. God is the one who is seated on the heavenly throne.

John then reports seeing a scroll in God’s right hand. The scroll is written on the inside and on the back, sealed with 7 seals.

To John’s readers a scroll would likely have brought to mind two images. The first would have been the scrolls with God’s word written on them. Just as Jesus was handed the scroll of Isaiah to read when he visited the synagogue, John’s hearers knew that scrolls contained the word that God spoke to them. Two examples: the story of creation and the entrance of sin into the world and the word of God spoken through the prophets calling the people back to faith were written on scrolls.

Also, those John’s contemporaries would likely have had in mind the official communications that came from Caesar to the governors. They were sealed to keep the contents confidential. In the case of official communications, unsealing and reading the communique led to the governors enacting its contents. Thus, in John’s Revelation, this scroll is God’s plan for the world.

John wept because no one was found worthy to open the scroll. Without opening the scroll God’s plan for humankind was delayed and, if it could not be read, God’s will would remain a mystery.

In the previous chapter of Revelation John reported that seated around God’s throne were 24 elders which are thought to be a “double twelve” – representatives of the 12 tribes of Israel and the 12 apostles. One of those 24 elders brought the reassuring word to John that the “Lion of the Tribe of Judah”, the “root of David” was worthy to open the scroll. For many, the hoped for messiah was a powerful person whom God would send to destroy evil and establish justice for the oppressed.[[8]](#footnote-8)

This anticipated messiah was sometimes described as a powerful lion-like conqueror who descended from King David and would re-establish David’s powerful kingdom.[[9]](#footnote-9)

In one of the great scenes of all Scripture John turns to look toward the Lion and what he sees in its place is a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered. John leaves it to our imaginations to picture a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered. The implication, however, is clear – the power and work of the messiah was not brute force issuing in violence, but the power of self-giving love that led Jesus to his death upon a cross.

Whenever John refers to Jesus is not by his name, but by the title, “the Lamb” as if to say to us Jesus was a man from Nazareth who taught and preached and healed, but he is the Messiah who restored us to God by his self-giving death upon a cross. Paul would say it this way when he wrote to the Colossians,

For in [Christ Jesus] all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, 20 and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.[[10]](#footnote-10)

†

For me there are two high points in today’s scripture reading. The first is the contrasting images – anticipating a Lion-of-a-messiah and seeing instead a slaughtered lamb.

It raises for us the question of “what is true power?” I need more time to consider the implications of this passage related to power because it does not easily fit into my life experience. My experience is that some force is occasionally required. I immediately think of my father when, as a boy, I would *occasionally* misbehave in worship. His response was not one of self-offering love…unless of course you count his firm squeeze on the back of my neck as a self-offering.

This fall, the Rev. Dr. Jim Davison will lead us in a 4-week study of Revelation and I look forward understanding Revelation more fully.

What we do understand of the Lamb’s power is given in one of the songs John reports. Those gathered around the throne sing to the Lamb.

…by your blood you ransomed for God saints from every tribe and language and people and nation….

The second highpoint of this passage is the second song sung to the Lamb. It is sung in full voice, with joy for what the Lamb has accomplished. John tells us that those gathered around the throne and singing to God numbered myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands. Talk about a heavenly choir. It is as if John is saying “I cannot begin to tell you how many voices joined in praise to the Lamb”.

John does tell us that they sing with full voice a song of praise,

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

If you count the number of praises offered to the Lamb you discover another example of the number 7

* wealth
* wisdom
* might
* honor
* glory and
* blessing

The implication? The Lamb is worthy of all praise.

This vision of heaven and the song of the heavenly choir inspired George Frederic Handel as he wrote *The Messiah.* This morning the choir will sing the song of the heavenly chorus in John’s vision. If you have ever heard the *Hallelujah Chorus* you might think that that was the finale of Handel’s great work. It is not. The finale of *The Messiah* comes from the scripture that we read and have explored this morning. “Worthy is the Lamb” and it is concluded just as John saw it in his vision with a great *Amen!*

†

The Revelation reveals to us in imagery is that God entrusts the future to Jesus, our Risen Lord. In another musical work Martin Luther wrote

The prince of darkness grim, we tremble not for him;

His rage we can endure, for lo! His doom is sure

One little word shall fell him.

That little word, of course, is Jesus.

Luther’s hymn ends with this great affirmation of faith which rings true with John’s vision.

That word above all earthly powers, no thanks to them [the earthly powers] abideth;

The Spirit and the gifts are ours through Him who with us sideth;

Let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also;

The body they may kill, God’s truth abideth still, His kingdom is forever.

A second implication from John’s vision is about the purpose of life. From the theory of evolution we learn that our purpose is to reproduce, to propagate our species. We know that there is indeed a very strong urge in that direction.

John offers us another “vision” or purpose – that is a life of praising God. There is a shallow way of understanding that – that we praise God for everything that happens to us: for a speeding ticket, a plumbing problem, for a splinter in your finger or the flu. Personally, I am unmoved by that understanding.

But the purpose of praising God is captured in one of the church’s catechisms. A catechism is an instructional form used earlier in the church. It presents a question and provides and answer. I’m paraphrasing here the very first question and answer of the Westminster Shorter Catechism:

Q. What is the chief end of humanity?

**A. Humanity’s chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy God forever.**

The direction and goal of all life is to glorify God and to enjoy God forever.

Each Sunday when we gather we join our voices with saints and angels and praise God in song for God’s character and actions. We offer our praise when we honestly confess our sin and open our lives to God’s transforming Spirit. We offer our praise when we listen to God’s Word anticipating that God has a word for us. We offer our praise when we give our gifts and make an offering of our lives to further God’s purposes for humanity and all creation. We offer our praise to God when we go from this place with a song on our lips and love in our hearts.

Of course, it is not just in church that we praise God.

* The person with substance abuse disorder offers their praise by turning to their higher power.
* The person battling depression offers their praise by asking God for help.
* The worn person praises God by asking for renewal of strength.
* The person stressed in work offers God by asking for peace.
* Together, we offer our praise to God by striving each day to love God with all that we are and to love our neighbor as ourselves.

†

Revelation is not a work of religious science fiction; it is an apocalypse telling the story of God’s plan and purposes for humanity and all creation. John offered it then, as the Spirit offers it now, as an affirmation of the Lamb and as encouragement to faithfulness with hope.

Thanks be to God for the vision God gave to John and for the hope and encouragement it brings.

Amen.

Rev. Dr. Steve Wilson

Oakmont Presbyterian Church

415 Pennsylvania Avenue

Oakmont, PA 15139

Swilson@oakmontpresby.org

1. Revelation 1:9 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Revelation 2:13 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Revelation 1:9 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Revelation 1:10 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Eugene Peterson, Reversed Thunder, Harper & Row Publishers, San Francisco, 1988, p. xi-xii [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Paul Minear quoted in Peterson, Reversed Thunder, p. xii [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See the New Interpreter’s Study Bible note on John 4:2 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. IBID, see note on Revelation 5:5 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. IBID [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Colossians 1:19-20 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)