

February 28, 2010
The National Presbyterian Church

Worthy is the Lamb

Revelation 5

Rev. Earl F. Palmer

This sermon today is a part of the book of Revelation series and we're now in the fifth chapter. John, who is in prison at Patmos, writes letters to the church of Ephesus and churches that surround it. His goal is to comfort them and encourage them because they're living in a very harsh time. These letters are probably written in the Sixties, shortly before the fall of Jerusalem in 70A.D. It was in 64A.D. when the Great Fire of Rome occurred, which the Roman historian Tacitus believed was started by Nero, the emperor at the time, since he had dreams of being an architect and redesigning the city. The fire was set in a slum area that he wanted to burn down, but the fire spread throughout the whole city. Nero blamed the Christians. He called them arsonists and blamed them for the fire, which was not true.

The Christians were being persecuted in Rome and even other cities. And so these folks that were believers, living in what would be the Roman province of Asia (modern Turkey today), around Ephesus, they're worried. "What's going to happen to us?" And, "How do we live our lives in such a time as this?" The Book of Revelation addresses those questions.

Last week we looked at Chapter 4. John has a vision, and in the vision in Chapter 4, he sees the Lord high and lifted up. It almost sounds like the theophany that Isaiah experienced in Isaiah 6, “In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord high and lifted up” (Isaiah 6:1). And it’s almost identical to that. He sees the Lord, in much the same way as now appears in Revelation 4. Last week we looked at that great song of the fourth chapter. “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come.” And then the second half of that song, “You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things and by your decision they exist and were created” (Revelation 4:8,11).

I made the observation last week that much of the imagery in the Book of Revelation cannot really be easily interpreted. We have to stand back in wonder. And that will be definitely true next week when we look at what I describe as the symphonic part of the book, Chapters 6-22. There are parts in which we just have to stand back. But the chorales, the songs that are sung throughout the Book of Revelation, are crystal clear, and that’s where the main teaching of this book is found, in the songs. This song that we just heard is perfectly clear – that God is holy and that he was, is and will be, that he’s the Lord of time, and that he made everything by his will. That truth that is fundamental to all other truths is affirmed in that song. The world was not created by an inferior deity. It was not created as an accident or a bad joke, as we see in some of Greek mythology. No, by God’s decision, and that’s the first song. Then something else happens!

Chapter 5: “And then I saw at the right hand of the one who was seated on the throne, a scroll written on the inside and on the back, and it was sealed with seven seals” (Revelation 5:1). What is this scroll? Well, here’s one place where we probably can make a wise guess, because from Chapter 6 on, this scroll will be opened. And so it becomes clear, the scroll refers to history as a large narrative; it refers to life; it refers to our life, the story seen as an active verb and seen as an objective noun. It’s written on the back and throughout. It’s written on all sides. But it’s sealed with seven seals. In ancient times, when an emperor would send a document, an order or a document to another country or any other place, he would take his ring and with clay he would make an imprint on the clay and a seal would be formed – sometimes wax, usually clay. And archeologists have found some

of those seals. The seals meant that that document belonged to the emperor. The ambassador from the emperor might have the right to open it because he's the emissary of the emperor. He can open it. But no one else can open it. And then sometimes the emperor would put two or three seals to show how important the document was. And sometimes an ambassador carrying the document would add his seal too, to show this document should not be opened except by someone who has the right to open it. And that's the imagery used here. "I saw a scroll. It had seven seals on it." That means it's a very important scroll. It's a very important story. It's there. "And I saw it, and I saw all these seven seals. And then I saw a mighty angel proclaiming with a loud voice, 'Who is worthy?'" This word means, "Who has the right?" "Who has the right to open the scrolls and to 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 John, when he hears this – because here's the story of life and he wants to know what it means – and he hears that no one in Heaven and Earth or under the Earth can open the scroll. And so John says, "I began to weep bitterly," because no one was found able, worthy to open the scroll (Revelation 5:1-4).

By the way, I have to tell you about first century cosmology. In the first century, writers accepted the cosmology of that time that the heavens were, they thought of as "up." And as Karl Barth says of that heaven designation, "That was the creation inconceivable to us – the creation, the part of the created order beyond our understanding, beyond our experience." It has to do with our future hopes too, and future dreams. It's the heavenly part of creation. The part unknown to us, the part we don't understand. And then the earth would be the creation conceivable to us, that's the way Karl Barth puts it – conceivable to us.¹ That would include the earth, it would include the solar system, that would include the created order far into deep space, because we can understand and measure it. That's a part of the earthly creation, because we understand it. We know the distances. We can study how it was started. We know the chemical composition of stars. That's the earth. That's the part of the created order that we understand and can study. We have a dominion over it, too. And then the creation beneath the earth, in the cosmology of the first century, that would be the realm of death, sometimes called Hades – and the place of the devils and of the demons, the devil - the realm, the dangerous realm underneath.

Now, notice what happens. Who can open the scroll? That's the question. And then a mighty angel says, "No one is able to open the scroll ... these scrolls or break these seals in Heaven, Earth or under the Earth." That sounds like very bad news. That's why John weeps bitterly when he hears this. You mean no one in Heaven can give the answer to the meaning of life? That sounds very bad, but you know, there's some good news in that too. That means that if someone says to you, "Come to my house next week. We have a séance planned, because one of my relatives has died, and that relative is on the other side now and will give us advice on the stock market. Bring 25 dollars to come to my séance and we will arrange for that transmission." Don't do it. Your dead relative, even if they're in Heaven, they don't know. They can't open the scroll. They don't know what the future is. What about an angel? The angels don't know. "Well, I have a special angel I'm especially fond of." Don't worry. They still don't know. Nothing in the heavenly realm – maybe that's why he started to weep – nothing in the heavenly realm can tell you the future. They don't know. That's good news. What about Earth? What about powerful leaders that put on seminars for \$300 in a hotel. Will they know? They don't know. Don't waste your money. There's no leader around that can open the scroll and tell you the story of your life and interpret past, present and future. They can't do it. So don't waste any money on that. That's good news. And then the devils and the demons - they make all kinds of promises that they know the future. Remember Dr. Faust, who was actually tricked by thinking the Devil could tell his future, and spent a lot of money on it, only to find that it didn't work. The Devil can tempt you, but the Devil doesn't know. The Devil doesn't have the power to end or extend your life. The Devil doesn't have that power. The Devil cannot tell the future. He doesn't know.

And so he's weeping. Then who can make sense out of history? When we think of history, there's a noun and a verb to history. The noun is existence itself. Who can open the scroll? The story of existence itself, and that's the noun; but also the verb – living. Who can make sense out of the verb side, the living, the chronology and the timing and all of this that happens dynamically. Who can make sense out of my life? And John hears this word: "No one, in Heaven or Earth or under the Earth." Therefore he's weeping. But there's a surprise for him. One of the Elders says to him, "Don't weep, John, because look, the lion of the Tribe of Judah, the root of David," – by the way, that's a Messianic reference to the Messiah. "He has conquered and he can open the scroll, break the seals" (Revelation 5:5).

“And then I saw.” Then he turns. I have to tell you that the lion is the most commonly named animal in all of the Bible, but did you know that in almost every single instance where a lion is mentioned, it’s mentioned as a sign of terror, and something to be terribly frightened of. There’s one little reference in Genesis of the whelp of the lion, which is a hint of Messiah. And then in one of the inter-testamental books, this actual phrase appears in Second Ezdras. The Messiah is called the Lion of the Tribe of Judah. But that’s only the second, that’s not even in the Old Testament sacred scriptures; that’s in the inter-testamental book Second Ezdras. But the lion is terrifying. And he turns, probably prepared now to really be frightened, to see this Lion of the Tribe of Judah that will open the scroll. And then he has a really big surprise. “So I turned, and I looked between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders, and there was a Lamb, standing as though he were slain” (Revelation 5:6).

There are two words for sheep in the New Testament. One is the word *amnos*. And almost all the references to sheep in the New Testament are the word *amnos* – it means sheep. Except for two places: When our Lord meets Peter at the Lake of Galilee and Peter says, “Yes, I love you, Lord.” Our Lord says, “Then Peter, feed my little sheep” (John 21:15). And he uses the word *arnios* which means ‘little sheep’. And so there, our Lord uses the word *arnios* with Peter – not *amnos*, sheep, but little sheep, lamb. And here is the other place where that word is used. What a surprise. It’s not a lion; it’s not even a ram. It’s not even a great sheep. It’s a little lamb. The humility of Jesus Christ, the humiliation of our Lord, he died on the cross as a lamb. And that – notice, the lamb as slain – and there he is. “And then that Lamb takes the scroll and the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders, they fall before the Lamb, each holding a harp and golden bowls full of incense” (Revelation 5:8). And here one piece of imagery is interpreted to us, which are the prayers of the saints. The prayers of the saints are somehow included here in this mysterious moment. That would be all the people that have been the believers. Their prayers are here, and then they sing a new song.

It’s called “A New Song.” “You are worthy to take the scroll and open its seals, for you were slain and by your blood you ransomed for God ...” That means you bought out of captivity; it’s one of the great words for our Lord as the Redeemer. “You ransomed for God, saints from every tribe, every language.” Notice, this is not just for Israel now. That hope for the Jews is now the hope for all of the world. “From every tribe, from every language,

from every people and every nation, and you have made them to be a kingdom and priests serving our God. And they will reign on Earth. And then I looked and I heard the voice of many angels surrounding the throne and the living creatures and the elders. And they numbered myriads and myriads and thousands of thousands” (Revelation 5:9-11). It’s myriads of myriads, which means uncountable number, thousands and thousands, singing with a full voice. And now they sing this great new song: “Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might, and honor and glory and blessing. And then I heard every creature in Heaven and on Earth and under the Earth and in the sea, and all that is with them, sing to the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb, ‘Blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever.’ And then the four living creatures all said, ‘Amen’” (Revelation 5:12-14). By the way, that’s a Hebrew word, ‘rock,’ ‘faithful.’ That chorale is perfectly clear. We have two songs here. The whole book of Revelation in one sense is built on these two songs. This is a book about God, who created and who redeemed, and continues to redeem. And now from Chapters 6 to 22, we’re about to see symphonic variations on this grand truth about the Lamb of God.

By the way, on Palm Sunday our Chancel Choir, augmented with other singers, will sing the Easter portion of George Friedrich Handel’s *Messiah*. We at The National Presbyterian Church heard the Christmas part of *Messiah* last December – it was absolutely marvelous. And the Christmas portion ends with the “Hallelujah Chorus.” But did you know that’s not the last song of the *Messiah*? After the Easter portion of *Messiah*, the final song is this: “Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and blessing and honor.” And then after that absolutely most marvelous chorale you ever heard, the masterwork closes with six minutes of “Amen.” Six minutes of “Amen,” or “God is Faithful.” And that’s the end of *Messiah*. Don’t miss it. Put that in your calendar. If you live in other countries, come, and plan to come back here.

We’ve just learned two things that are terribly important. First, in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5, we learned of the goodness of creation, that the whole created order is not a mistake, it’s God’s decision. That’s good news. You and I have worth because God made us. And secondly, the crisis of our brokenness has not destroyed God’s first decision, because God has not only created us and loves us in creation; he loves us in redemption. He redeems us.

He ransomed us – because of our brokenness, we need to be ransomed from the captivity of sin and human brokenness. Jesus Christ the Lamb ransomed us from every nation, every tribe, every group of people all over the world, and made us his sons and daughters, his kingdom. And he did that. Therefore, now we know that we are beloved, for two reasons – because he created us and he redeemed us. And those two great themes are going to hold together the whole book of Revelation. So why are we afraid of Nero? Or why are we afraid of an Adolf Hitler? Or why are you afraid of anyone on Heaven, Earth, or the Devil. You don't need to be, because you're in God's hands, and he's faithful.

Let me tell you a story, one of my favorite stories. It is not original with me, but I heard it from E. Stanley Jones, a great evangelist in the last century. E. Stanley Jones tells the story of a little boy who made a sailboat. A little boy made a sailboat in New York City. He made it himself and then he took it to Central Park. And in Central Park there's a beautiful lake there, you know. He put his sailboat in the Central Park Lake and it was better at catching the wind than it was at steering, because his boat just went right out to this middle of Central Park Lake, and he couldn't get it back. And the wind just took it, this wonderful sailboat. He watched it. He was just a little guy. What are you going to do? And it's kind of sad. But a couple days later he was walking on West 57th Street and he saw his boat in a window of a pawn shop. And in the pawn shop was his sailboat. It was right there. It had obviously gone to the other side of the lake; somebody found it and sold it. Wow. He saw it, he went in and he said to the pawn shop owner, "I want that boat in the – in the window." And the man said, "Well, this is what it costs." And so he said, "Don't sell it. Save it, because I want to buy it." And so he went home and he got his money from his allowance and earnings he'd made. And he comes back to the pawn shop and buys the boat from the owner. According to E. Stanley Jones, as the boy left the pawn shop, he said this. He said, "Little boat, you are mine for two reasons now. I made you and I bought you." That's Chapter 4, Chapter 5 of Revelation.

Heavenly Father, thank you for that. Thank you that you made us and you redeemed us. Brothers and sisters, if you are wondering how much you're worth, you need to hear that song. You need to hear both songs. You need to hear what this book of Revelation says, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I'll come in and eat with him and he with me" (Revelation 3:20). You, wherever you are in your

journey right now, you could invite this Lamb, this Lion who is a lamb, Jesus Christ, into your life. And then you will discover and you will know that you were made by his love, and you are redeemed by his love. Thank you Lord for that. And may we experience that in the journey of our lives. You are the Lamb. Amen.

1 Barth, Karl. *Dogmatics in Outline*. Harper Perennial, 1947.

Earl Frank Palmer Copyright © 2010 All Rights Reserved

Sunday Worship at 8, 9:15 & 11 a.m.
Classes for Adults, Youth, and Children at 9:15 a.m.

THE NATIONAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

4101 Nebraska Avenue, N.W.

Washington, D.C. 20016

www.NationalPres.org 202.537.0800