

Worthy Is the Lamb

Revelation 5:1-13

Sermon preached by Charles C. Williamson

Philadelphia Presbyterian Church

April 25, 2010

When the book of Revelation was written, the young Christian church was engaged in a struggle for survival. The church consisted of pockets of believers scattered here and there about that part of the world. They were house churches, meeting, sometimes secretly, in people's homes. Some Christians were experiencing persecution because of their faith. They were generally poor, marginalized and had little power against the overwhelming religious, political, and economic power of Rome. Sometimes these Christians got discouraged; sometimes they were tempted to give it up and join in with the pervasive powers of the day.

What is the church to do when it appears that some other power holds all the cards? How do you go about being the church in a sometimes hostile and dangerous world? That's the question which is addressed by the book of Revelation. And in this book, one of the things that John calls the church to do is to worship, to praise God, to celebrate that there is a power greater than all the earthly powers—like Rome—that sometimes appear to have all the power. You come to church to worship God and to be reminded that the world—all the world, even Rome—is under God's authority and judgment, and it is God's will that is going to be done.

A number of years ago, in one church that I was serving, there was a young woman whose life appeared to be coming apart at the seams. She was recently separated from her husband, caring for two young boys (who were a real handful), living in a tiny apartment, working at a dead-end job. In her way of thinking, all the cards were stacked against her, and she was fighting an impossible battle. She was what you would call a marginal member of the church; her attendance was hit and miss—mostly miss. Anyway, one day she came in to talk to me and to tell me of the burdens and challenges she was facing in her life. After she talked for awhile and painted a picture of a pretty desperate life, I said,

I want to make a suggestion to you that I've never done before. I would like for you to make the commitment to come to church every Sunday for the next year. Not because I think that coming to church will make the problems go away, but because I think that coming to church will remind you that the problems, as big as they seem, are not all there is. This is God's world, and God's will is going to be done. I want you to know that your life is in God's hands, and that God is working out God's good purpose for you. You need to be reminded week in and week out that there is a power that is at work in your life that is stronger than all the other things that seem to be pulling it apart.

How do you live in a world where there are earthquakes and volcanoes and terrorists and cancer cells and economic woes and lost jobs and general uncertainty? Revelation's answer is that you come to church and worship God. You come to church to

be reminded that there is a Power at work in the world that is greater than all these things, and that God's good will is going to be done.

So here's the picture of worship that John paints in Revelation. There at the center is the throne, God's throne, and gathered around that throne are 24 elders. Now as is so often the case in Revelation, that number—24—is a symbolic number. You probably know that throughout the Bible the number 12 is the number that symbolized completeness, wholeness. So here we have the double 12. I think it wants us to think of the 12 tribes of Israel from the Old Testament and the 12 apostles who followed Jesus—which is to say that gathered around the throne, worshipping God, is the whole church, the old church, the new church, all together worshipping our God.

Then I saw in the right hand of the one seated on the throne a scroll written on the inside and on the back (Revelation 5:1)

As these elders are gathered around the throne, John saw in the hand of the One seated on the throne a scroll. The scroll is God's word. The scroll describes God's plan for the world. The scroll contains God's purpose. But the scroll was...

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. (Revelation 5:1b-4)

The scroll is sealed, and God's plan remains hidden because there is no one worthy to break the seals and open the scroll. When John saw that there was no one worthy to open the scroll of God's word, he wept.

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 sang. (Revelation 5:5-9a)

What do you do when you worship God? You sing. Singing has a power to lift our spirits and inspire us in ways that words alone cannot do. It's Paul and Silas singing through the night when they were in the Philippian jail. It's the slaves singing "Swing Low Sweet Chariot, Coming For to Carry Me Home." I know it is sometimes said that the slaves sang because they were happy. That's not the way it was. They sang because singing reminded them that slavery and oppression were not the last word.

There's a wonderful story that is told by Ernest Gordon in his book, *Through the Valley of the Kwai*. It tells about his experiences during World War II being held in a Japanese prison camp. This was, by the way, the prison camp that was made famous in the movie, "Bridge Over the River Kwai." Ernest Gordon was born in Scotland, and when the war began he joined first the Royal Air Force, then later the British Army. His unit was captured in 1942 and taken to this infamous prison camp. Life in the camp was impossible: brutal, back-breaking manual labor, almost no food, cruelty by the prison guards, disease and squalor. Life in the camp degenerated into an "every man for himself" mentality.

But then, as Ernest Gordon tells the story, one day a shipment from the Red Cross included six violins. Can you imagine anything that the prisoners needed less than six violins? But before long strains of music were heard floating across the prison camp. One man showed the prisoners how to make woodwinds from bamboo, and drums from old oil barrels. He even reproduced from memory the scores of several musical compositions. They would get together and play.

Then came the long-awaited day—a concert. As the makeshift orchestra played, Captain Gordon writes, "I could tell that everyone's fancies had taken wing, and were soaring far out beyond the bamboo curtain that held us in." The concerts became a regular event and were often followed by community singing. When the singing was at its height, the requests were for songs of inspiration, like "The Lord Is My Shepherd." (We sang it a few minutes ago.) It was music and singing that lifted the prisoners' spirits. (This account comes from Gordon, *Through the Valley of the Kwai*, p. 159-167.)

That experience in the prison camp changed Ernest Gordon's life. When the war was over, he entered the ministry and spent much of his ministry as Chaplain and Dean of the Chapel at Princeton University. Worshipping God, singing praise to God—these point us to a power greater than all other powers.

What do you do when you worship God? You sing.

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, (Revelation 5:11-12a)

"Worthy Is the Lamb"

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....

And the four living creatures said, "Amen!" (Revelation 5:13)♠