

Revelation 5:11-14, 21:22-27 The Lamb

August 7, 2022

Order of Service for August 7, 2022

Welcome and announcements

Invocation

Gathering Hymn: VT #718 “Gentle Shepherd, Come and Lead Us”

Lighting of the Peace Lamp

Responsive Reading: Psalm 100

Hymn of Praise: VT #75 Praise, My Soul, the King of Heaven!”

Joys and Concerns

Congregational Prayer

Offering

Children’s Time

Hymn: VT #209 “We Dream of a Turning”

Scripture Reading: Revelation 5:11-14, 21:22-27; Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

Sermon

Hymn of Response: StJ #95 “I want to walk as a child of the light”

Spoken Benediction

Sending Hymn: VT #744 “Shepherd Me, O God”

Our series “Peaceful Endings // Peace to the End” has reached the book of *Revelation*, the final book of the bible. It is important to note that revelations of God have continued long after the *Revelation of John*, and maybe that was the point of the architects of the Bible. Before we tuck into today’s topic I have two small points to make by way of preface.

First, it is impossible for any preacher to reduce an exploration of the Book of Revelation to a Sunday or two; maybe it could even be described as irresponsible. The allusions to Christian life in the midst of the 1st Imperial cult confounds most casual readers of the *Revelation*. Not only that, the *Revelation* utilizes imagery and metaphors from the Jewish writings (what many call the Old Testament and the Apocryphal writings alongside them) with which many 1st century Christians would have been familiar. We are less familiar with those writings. So, we will do what we can in the next two weeks and we all know more can be said.

Secondly, the book we are looking at is called the *Revelation to John*, and here note the singular tense. Often times we hear people refer to the book of revelations, but that is not the title. This is a significant point because we dare not look at one piece of the *Revelation* without taking in the whole. “Worthy is the Lamb that is slain” helps us interpret and understand other aspects of the vision. That is my preamble, and it transitions nicely to more overview of what remains in my sermon time.

Today we will explore the Lamb of John’s revelation. We will first consider the way the *Revelation* utilizes this image of the Lamb. From there we will explore usage of the lamb in early Christian and Jewish literature. We will conclude with considerations of discipleship to the lamb.

Section I: Centrality of the Lamb

Image

I have included this picture because it is very telling of the subtle, and yet quite pointed, work of God’s spirit in making Patmos (1:9) the location where a vision was revealed to John. Patmos, as we see on the map, is the smack dab center. On one edge of the Roman Empire we have Jerusalem which became the hub of Jewish religious life with the Temple being the center of that hub. On the other end of the map we have the political hub of the Roman Empire. What happens on Patmos, not Jerusalem or Rome, needs to be central in our spirituality. Since Patmos is central on the map it is worth considering what is central within *The Revelation*.

This, of course, is a matter of debate but I think the Lamb is the central piece of this vision. There are 27 verses which reference the Lamb. The temple has a nice showing at 14, but it is telling that the Lamb is actually at the center of this non-Jerusalem and non-Roman temple (7:15-17). Restoration and healing happen in this Temple: “they will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.” Wow, it is such a beautiful vision of what worship and life with the Lamb can be. And we must note that the people receiving this letter were in dire need of such a good shepherd.

Patmos is also significant for that reason. Two theories exist what on earth or heaven John was doing on the island of Patmos. Some suggest he was stopping over for one reason or another: an island holiday, a shipwreck, or something like this. Early church leaders (Eusebius & Irenaeus), however, maintain that John was exiled to Patmos as a consequence of Christian identity. The “fact that John mentions persecution, patient endurance and the island of Patmos all in one sentence suggests he was an unwilling resident.”¹ His condition followed in the footsteps of the Jesus who became Christ. His condition reflected that of those receiving his pastoral letter from exile. The Lamb, and the way of the Lamb, is central to this story. We do not one unacquainted with our grief, but rather one who has been tested in every way that we have been (Hebrews 4:14-15). The way of the Lamb may lead to hunger, scorching heat, exile, or slaughter, but it is none other than the way of deeper life in God.

Slide: God and the Lamb on the Throne

The presence of the Lamb on the throne with God in *The Revelation* underscore this reality even more so. Theologian Richard Bauckham spends a whole chapter in his book on the theology of the book of *Revelation* on the worship of Jesus. The Lamb and God are on the throne because “what Christ does, God does”. The Lamb is central because the Lamb has demonstrated the way of God to bring judgement and restoration to our world. This has ultimately been God’s work, it was the work of Jesus while on earth, it is the on-going work of the Lamb and the One seated on the throne, and the work continues through the people of God across the centuries. God us “is present as the Lamb who conquers by suffering. Christ’s suffering witness and sacrificial death are, in fact, as we shall see, the key event in

¹ J. Nelson Kraybill, *Imperial Cult and Commerce in John’s Apocalypse* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press Ltd), pp. 32-33.

God's conquest of evil and establishment of [their] kingdom on earth."² It is not a polytheism which one might find in the Roman religious system and it is not a Gnostic heresy (Marcionites) which separates Jesus from God. No, the Lamb and the One seated are the throne are there together because God and Jesus the Christ are of the same essence and about the same tasks of salvation and redemption.

I will conclude this section with a story of an unwilling shepherd. It is that of St. Patrick.

Slide: St. Patrick the Shepherd

We all know something of St. Patrick-- that he comes from the emerald isle (green is good) and maybe that he drove snakes from that island (not sure the make and model of his snake limo). Less is known about those events which helped shape him into the saint that he became. Amidst difficulty and duress, the lamb was central to the Patrick who became a saint.

[I]t is often forgotten that Patrick's first introduction to Ireland was involuntary. At the age of sixteen he was kidnapped by Irish raiders, stolen from his home...and taken to Ireland as a slave. Previously, he had lived a relatively comfortable life as the son of a petty Roman official. This violent change in his life, as may well be supposed, was a shocking experience. He found himself sold to a local king who employed him in a variety of menial occupations, such as herding livestock on the desolate mountains of the north. As a slave, his life was not valued more highly than the beasts he tended. As he later wrote, "I was chastened exceedingly and humbled every day in hunger and nakedness".

At the same time, far from home and with little prospect of ever seeing his family again, he remembered who he was and where he came from. In particular, he clung fast to his faith as a Christian. Whereas previously he had been relatively indifferent in his faith, now he liked to spend his long days among the flocks reciting endlessly the prayers impressed on his memory since childhood."³

In his time of bondage and languishing, Patrick who would become the saint, held the lamb at the center. How do we do this? How might we do this? How have we survived COVID? How might we tweak out coping mechanisms? Keeping the lamb at the center keeps one alive spiritually regardless of the circumstances.

² Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), chapter 3 "The Lamb on the throne" with quotations from pp. 63-64.

³ Robert Ellsberg, *All Saints: Daily Reflections on Saints, Prophets, and Witnesses for Our Time* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company: 1998), p. 122.

Section II: Lambs behind the Lamb

Slide: (The Lamb that was slain)

We have all these references to the Lamb in the *Revelation* and in John's gospel (a different John we should note⁴). We hear John the Baptist proclaim, behold "the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (1:29). It is not your particular sin or mine which is addressed-- it is the sin of THE WORLD. The sin of the world and how it gets taken away by a lamb have roots in the Hebrew writings.

The first Passover was instituted in the book of Exodus chapter 12. A household, or several households, were to gather for this meal to honour God's liberating them from the slavery of Pharaoh. Honouring this event happens in a community: a family unit or a collection of families (vv 3-4). The lamb should be without blemish (v.5). A hyssop branch was to be used to smear the lamb's blood on the lintel of the house (v.22). No bone of the lambs body should be broken (v.46). The lamb is not sacrificed as a means to square the personal ledger with God. No, it was and is an event to acknowledge God's deliverance from oppressive forces in our world. Isaiah 53 (v.7) describes this in relation to the suffering servant who, in the vision, would bring restoration for the people of God.

John's gospel, in particular, relates the Passover lamb to Jesus. I already noted the declaration by John the Baptist that Jesus is the Lamb who takes away the sin of the world. John 19 says that Jesus was condemned to death at noon on the day before Passover (19:14), and this was the very time when the priests began to slay the paschal lambs in the Temple⁵. While Jesus was on the cross, a sponge full of wine was raised up to him containing hyssop (19:29) which Jesus drinks mingling his blood with hyssop and then he says, "it is finished"; much like smearing the blood on the lintel via a hyssop branch. No bones of Jesus are broken (19:33); just like the Passover lamb. Fascinating and wonderful!

An interesting convention within John's gospel is that Jesus is simultaneously the Passover lamb as well as shepherd. In John 10 (v.11) Jesus declares that he is the Good Shepherd. This is not far off from that passage I earlier quoted from Revelation 7 in which the Lamb on the throne would shepherd the people to springs of the water of life. And this shepherding extends beyond the people we would normally associate with the flock.

⁴ Among numerous academic sources supporting this see *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, edited by Bruce Metzger and Michael Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 653.

⁵ Raymond Brown, *The Gospel According to John XIII-XXI* in The Anchor Bible Series (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1970), pp. 883.

This Lamb brings spiritual protection, deliverance, restoration differently than other lambs which might have been referenced. The little read Testament of Joseph speaks of a lamb who overcomes evil beasts by crushing them underneath (19:8). In the book of *Revelation* the lamb does indeed conquer the Kings of the earth, and then shepherds them into the New Jerusalem in chapter 21.⁶ Through the sacrifice of the Lamb, and the sacrifices of those who follow the lamb, the Kings of the Earth experience conversion and they are restored. The wolves have lain down with the lambs. This is powerful encouragement for those who read the Book of *Revelation* and read it today. This takes me to my final section of the day.

Section III: Discipleship of the Lamb

Slide: St. Germaine Cousin

What better way to speak of the discipleship of the text than through a story. So I offer for us the tale of St. Germaine Cousin.

St. Germaine was a peasant girl from the village of Pibrac, near Toulouse. Her mother died in childbirth, and she was raised by an unloving father and a stepmother who made no effort to conceal her positive dislike for the girl. To keep Germaine away from her own children her stepmother forced Germaine to sleep in the stable or under the stairs, kept her busy with chores, and fed her on table scraps.

Despite the drudgery and injustice of her life, Germaine accepted every insult with cheerfulness and love. She especially welcomed the task of tending her father's sheep, as this afforded an opportunity for undisturbed prayer and communion with God. As she stood watch in the fields, God "spoke to her soul as He speaks to the humble and clean of heart, and she lived ever consciously in His presence."

Germaine was faithful in attending daily Mass. When she heard the bells ringing she would plant her crook in the ground and hasten to church, entrusting the flock to her guardian angel. Invariably she found them safe and sound.

In time, Germaine acquired a reputation for holiness among her neighbors. This won her no special privileges at home. Indeed, she was harshly punished for sharing her table scraps with more unfortunate beggars. Even her stepmother was caught short, however, when she confronted Germaine on a winter's day and forced her to open her apron, expecting to find there some missing bread. Instead there fell a cascade of spring flowers.

⁶ Bauckham, 138-139.

Afterward her family grudgingly invited Germaine to accept a proper bed in the home. But this real-life Cinderella preferred her humble place beneath the stairs. There one morning she was found dead at the age of twenty-two. Her grave soon became a popular object of pilgrimage. She was canonized by Pope Pius IX.

What does discipleship to the Lamb entail?

- It means keeping the Lamb central whatever our financial or relational or employment status.
- It means with care tending to the least of these be they beasts or sisters or brothers.
- It means a willingness to sacrifice for friend and foe knowing that they, too, are part of the Great Shepherds flock. We may question the capacity of a persons or institutions ability to be transformed, but the Lamb continues seeking and calling and leading.
- It means remaining steadfast to the Lamb when the powers of the world suggest otherwise. Death is merely the gateway to a new life; no worries.

In the end, though, the book of *Revelation* is not as much about us as it is about God and the Lamb. We do the best we can, and the shepherding of the Lamb continues long after we are gone. As Julian of Norwich is often times quoted as saying, “All will be well and all manner of things will be well”. This spoken in a time of pestilence, plague and war. The Great Shepherd of the Sheep keeps about their business through the centuries, and for this we give thanks. Amen.

Patrick Preheim, co-pastor Nutana Park Mennonite Church