

## Revelation 5:1-14

### “Who is Worthy”

Today is Christ the King Sunday. It is the day on the Christian Calendar when we celebrate that Jesus Christ indeed reigns over all creation. It is the last Sunday of the Christian year and only a fitting ending for the one who truly is our king. When I began to prepare for this morning's sermon, the Holy Spirit led me to this chapter of John's Revelation. And when I read it, I immediately thought of a story I heard when I attended a preaching conference in Nashville a few years ago.

The Festival of Homiletics is an annual preaching conference where the preachers who are considered the "best of the best" teach and preach for a week. I try to attend whenever it is in Nashville because that is such a fun city and close enough to drive instead of flying. In this particular year, I traveled with several other ministers from our Presbytery and on the ride home, we all agreed that Susan Sparks may have been the highlight of our week. Susan was a trial lawyer turned stand up comic turned Baptist preacher whose first call was to be Senior Minister of Madison Avenue Baptist Church in New York City! What a journey.

On her first day as pastor, the 103 year old matriarch of the church died. Susan was called by her daughter, who herself was 80, to go to the funeral home and see “Mama” with her before everyone else arrived. Before they went in for the viewing, the daughter explained that Mama had been rather vain in life and so Susan was not surprised to find her beautifully coiffed and wearing a gorgeous silk suit, matching shoes, handbag – the whole shebang!

At the sight of her Mom in the casket, the daughter began to cry so Susan put one hand on the daughter's back and thought it would be the pastoral thing to lean down and touch Mama also. Remember now that this is her FIRST day of ministry! But when she touched the arm of

the deceased, she cried out, “Oh gross!” and pulled back her hand. It seems that Mama had a square arm.

It was all that the daughter could do not to laugh in this solemn occasion as she explained that Mama had always been worried about one thing. Whether or not they have hair color in heaven. So her daughter had fulfilled her mother’s dying request to hide a box of Clairol in the sleeve of her blouse in case she got to the afterlife and had no way to cover her roots!

This story is so representative of our fascination with the end of times. What will heaven be like? How will we look? Will we indeed have new bodies? If so, I want my 16 year old one! But the truth is that no one knows. And that is why we find John weeping in this passage. You see, John is afraid that no one is worthy to open the scroll. The book of life. And if the book cannot be opened, we will never know how it ends.

And then, John’s weeping is interrupted by an announcement – an answer, if you will. “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.” Of course, what was John worried about? The Lion, the conqueror, the warrior, the Messiah, the son of David can reveal the end of the story.

But when John turns around, he doesn’t see a lion. He sees a lamb. I am sure John was so perplexed. It was like someone playing “Hail to the Chief” when a beggar walked in. It was like reaching into the coffin and touching a loved one and discovering that she had a square arm. What does this mean – to John, to you, to me? Well, friends, I think this passage is a reminder that God does not think the way that we do. God does not answer prayer the way that we would. As the prophet Isaiah has written, God’s ways are not our ways. And I will add – “Thanks be to God!”

Because truth be told, you or I or John or the Jews of the Bible *would* save with a lion. The king of the jungle. The one who could come roaring in and scare us all with his fangs and a wild mane and wicked eyes and a forceful swat of his paw. But God sent a Lamb instead. And not just any lamb – a lamb that had been slain. So what *does* mean about the end of the story?

First of all, it means that while we are looking for the Lion, we may well miss the lamb. Let me share a story that helps make this clearer. When I was working as a Chaplain in the State Mental Hospital there was a certain patient there who captured my heart. I'll call her Myrtle. Patrick Harris is an acute emergency facility and patients are only supposed to stay 30 days but Myrtle had been there over six months. She simply had nowhere else to go.

Besides being chronically, mentally ill, Myrtle suffered from crippling arthritis and could not use her hands for much more than eating or dressing so the normal halfway houses would not accept her because she had so many physical needs and could not work at all.

Myrtle looked to be about 80 eighty years old so I was shocked when I consulted her chart and found out she was only 68. No one there had time for Myrtle but something in her reached out to me from my first day of work. I had heard that she was mean, conniving and cantankerous but took my chances and went to visit her in her room. I was pleasantly surprised to find her funny, honest and someone that I could learn a lot from.

All of the chaplains had about an hour on Wednesdays after lunch when we could basically work anywhere in the hospital instead of in our assigned area and Myrtle became my Wednesday afternoon project. There I learned Myrtle's sad story. She had been abused by her parents, her husband had died young, she did not even know where her children were. She was schizophrenic and often hallucinated and would tell me how she saw writing on the floor everywhere she went.

Every Wednesday, we took a walk outside and ultimately ended up in the break room where I would put her change into the machines for her to get her standard Coke and powdered donuts. Then we would go outside again and she would eat and smoke one cigarette after the other. I would light her first one for her because they could not have matches there and her crippled hands could not operate the lighter that was attached to the wall in the smoking area. Before it burned out, she would light the next one from it and on and on and on. And she would talk the whole time. About her life and her dreams. And surprisingly, about her God.

At first, I could not understand how Myrtle could believe in God, her life had been so sad. But as I came to know her, I realized that Myrtle had felt Jesus come to her in her many hours of need. Instead of just seeing the lions in her life – mental illness, homelessness, abuse – she chose to look at the lambs – the blessings. She talked about a God who provided a place for her to live, disability money to exist on. She had a brother, who though he was in a nursing home called her once a week. These were the things that Myrtle lived for and gave credit to God for despite the hardships of her life.

She told me that God had sent her a chaplain who would make time for her every week and we never parted without praying together. And right before I left my work there, Myrtle's son came forward to claim her and take her home to live. It seems that he had been able to improve his own life to the point where his wife could stop working and help care for Myrtle and he really wanted his mom in his life. Friends, Myrtle helped me learn to be thankful for the things that most of us take for granted.

So what are the lions in our lives? What are we so busy looking for or at that causes us to miss the unexpected gifts of life? Perhaps our lion is the aftermath of the election in our nation that we just can't seem to let go of. Or the economy or the racial tensions that just won't seem to die down. Perhaps it is our preoccupation with what our neighbor says or does that we don't like. Perhaps it is the way everything changes that causes us to focus on the *change* rather than the *result*. You see, the world and our lives are full of lions that often cause us to look for the wrong things.

Even John, who had SEEN the Lord and observed his miracles and heard his teachings and witnessed his resurrection, is confused and bewildered when he looks on the throne. Like us, he is looking for a lion and yet, he finds a lamb. And although the lamb is powerful, with seven horns and seven eyes, he still seems too helpless to be worthy. Well friends, the book is called REVELATION for a reason. And the Holy Spirit opens John's eyes a little wider so he can see more. And when he does, the real king is revealed.

Because not only is there a LAMB on the throne - the place of honor, the center of worship - but indeed it is a lamb who was SLAIN! As modern day Christians, we know that this lamb is the crucified Christ. But I think it represents even more. You see, it has been my experience that most people do not have trouble accepting Christ as King of the end of time, *of eternity*. Because although we don't really know anything about heaven one thing that we do know is that Jesus will be there.

No, what we have trouble remembering is that eternity include today. And that means that Christ is King of THIS life too. So that is why God, in His infinite wisdom, makes the SLAIN LAMB the center of our worship. Because this kind of king represents the suffering of all people through all the ages who have experienced heartache for their love and loyalty to God.

THIS *lamb* is a king who knows what it is like to be rejected, to have doubts, to watch relationships crumble, to see friends cry at the death of a loved one, even to lose a child. This *lamb*, this King, loves you and me enough to experience ALL of life with and for us. And I think if the lamb was one who had only experienced peace and tranquility, then THAT kind of kingship would be rather meaningless in the end.

But let us not forget that the king, the lamb IS on the throne. The throne signifies authority, in life and in worship. So this picture reminds us that God gathers his people to himself as the center – of our work, our worship, our loves and our struggles. This God is the center of our lives. And while I am really not comfortable getting in to all the symbolism of Revelation, one that I do find interesting and believable comes from minister Eugene Peterson. He believes that it is possible that the four winged creatures around the throne represent the classic symbols of the four Gospels- the man, the lion, the ox, and the eagle. This would be a reminder that the best way to keep God at the center of our lives and thus our true king, is to stay grounded in the Gospel – the Word of God.

He also offers that the twenty-four elders could represent the twelve tribes of Israel and the twelve Disciples of Christ combined. Thus when ALL the people of God, those of the Old Testament who looked forward to the coming Messiah, and those of the New Testament who have seen and believe in the Messiah, gather around his throne – then Christ will indeed be king. And in this way, we are reminded that we are called to worship Christ as King so that we can live in response to and from the center of the Living God.

But the real reason that we celebrate and remember this day is indeed because the Lamb was slain. In fact, the Greek word that this original revelation was recorded in uses the word "slaughtered" in the past participle tense. This represents a continuing effect of a once-and-for-

all past act. And so we celebrate that our King did indeed stand trial before the Romans, find himself convicted by the courts, suffered on the cross, was crucified and buried so that WE could be victorious EVEN today over the powers of death through the resurrection of Christ!

The response to this vision is for ALL of God's people to worship. To sing praise to God the Creator, Christ the Redeemer and the Holy Spirit the Sustainer. And ultimately, this vision of worship calls us to examine *how* we worship the King. Do we worship him as a lion and therefore exhibit God's power and might and strength and authority? Well yes, sometimes we must. But more often, I believe God calls us to worship the lamb. Because the lamb said "love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." The lamb took the children on his knee and blessed them. The lamb picked up a towel and a basin and so redefined greatness as he washed his disciples' feet. The lamb said, "Take up your cross and follow me."

And when the world worships Christ as King by following the words and examples that he gave us, then we too can end our worship with the same words of John's vision. AMEN. So be it! Even today and until the end of time. Christ is King. Let us worship the king with our words, our lives, and our hearts. "To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever." Amen!