

May 5, 2019
Revelation 7:9-17
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“Is He Worthy?”

Good morning! I have a confession to make which probably won't surprise you. Some of you may have figured it out already. Here's my confession: I was kind of a weird kid. Maybe some of this had to do with me, but I think it also had to do with my parents. Of course, many adolescents think their parents are wacky, but in my middle school and early high school years, my father was involved in a fair amount of publicity and a bit of controversy because of a book he had written. It was a book about a book -- the biblical book of Revelation. My father's book was titled, *The Most Revealing Book of the Bible: Making Sense of Revelation*. I didn't read the book until I was an adult -- I really would have been wacky if I was reading theology when I was thirteen -- but what I didn't realize until much later, was that for me Revelation wasn't some crazy, out there, end-of-the-world, Y2K kind of narrative like it was for some of my seminary classmates. I think Revelation is interesting, not weird or creepy: what's weird is that it was kind of normal for me.

I don't know what your relationship is with the book of Revelation, or if you even have one. If you think of this book as a crazy relative who you only see at a distance and try not to engage with, I'm not sure I can convince you to be friends in just a few weeks, but I have an opportunity so I'm going to give it a shot. Once every three years, Revelation comes around in the cycle of lectionary readings between Easter and Pentecost: that's six weeks of Revelation -- you got a break last week with Betty's message, and you'll get to hear David Hendricks preach on the gospel of John next week, but you'll get at least a couple doses of Revelation from me.

So first just a bit of context: the Revelation to John, which we commonly call Revelation (singular) is the last book of the Bible. It

was also one of the last books included in the collection of materials we call the New Testament, or the biblical canon. Apparently the early church fathers were also put off by the imagery: Revelation is a different genre than any other New Testament book: it isn't a gospel or a letter or an exhortation -- it's a vision: a man who identifies himself as John -- we're pretty sure he is not the guy who wrote the gospel or the epistles with that name--wrote down the vision he had while on the Greek island of Patmos. It's a particular kind of vision: one which *reveals* what is going to happen in the future or in heaven. This is often some kind of show-down between God and Satan, a permanent resolution to questions of good and evil. The Greek word for this kind of revelation is *apokalypsis*, which is where we get our word apocalypse. Are you with me so far? Because I feel like when I start throwing Greek words around, people start checking out, or asking, Why should I care?

It's a fair question. Here's why I think we should care: because Revelation, particularly today's text from chapter 7, deals with a very important and very contemporary question. You can live your life without thinking about this or asking the question out loud, but the way you live your life is the answer to the question. Here's the question: to whom do I owe my allegiance? In other words, where do my loyalties lie? A slightly different, but related question is, Who is going to win? You can think about this in terms of politics if you like: do you back the candidate who supports the causes you believe in, or the one who has the best chance of winning the election? Or do you have to compromise and back someone you don't like in hopes that you can still get what you want? When you peel back all the crazy imagery and wild scenes of Revelation, the basic questions are: Who is worthy of our allegiance and Who is going to win?

The answers to these questions were literally a matter of life and death to Christians at the time. The Roman emperor Nero demanded allegiance: not only to the Empire of Rome, but that his subjects would worship him as a god. To refuse to offer incense in worship of Ceasar was to risk death. **Slide** Rather than the Emperor's profile or a symbol of military power, these early Christians would have rallied to a different standard: the symbol of the cross, carried by an unlikely hero. Those folks in verse 13 who are robed in white are the martyrs who have come through the ordeal: they were Christians who were

killed because they refused to worship the Emperor. They refused to worship anyone except Jesus Christ. **Slide** Here's a painting of what this gathering in Revelation 7 might have looked like, with the white robed figures with palm branches -- the sign of honor and victory. Notice the figure in the altar in the center of the gathering isn't Jesus - - at least, it isn't the human Jesus, it's a young sheep, or a Lamb. Why is there a lamb on the altar? There are a lot of layers to that question: the lamb is the Passover Lamb whose blood was smeared on the doorposts of the Hebrews in Egypt so the angel of death would pass over them; this is how the Hebrews were freed from slavery. The Lamb of God is Jesus Christ, who was crucified on a Roman cross to give us grace and freedom from the eternal consequences of our sin. **Slide** And this altar where the Lamb was slain is the throne of God: the One and only One who is worthy of blessing and glory and honor and power. The Lamb deserves our allegiance in this lifetime, because it is the Lamb who wins the final battle and defeats death itself. Jesus is not only the Shepherd who teaches and guides us, Jesus is the Lamb who died to save us. **Slide** Oh yeah, and one more thing: Jesus is the Lion of Judah who came to save his people and who is stronger than any adversary.

This is some pretty heavy theological stuff: it's different than the Apostle Paul writing a letter to a congregation fighting over who has the greatest spiritual gifts, but the questions of Who is worthy? And Who wins? Are ultimate questions: if you guess wrong, you're going to lose everything. When we know this going into this book, we can begin to see why the author of Revelation presented this truth as a series of vivid images rather than an essay. This is the kind of stuff which engages our imagination and grabs us on a gut level, not just an intellectual one. Jesus is so multi-layered and complex: Lamb and Lion, Shepherd and King, Victim and Victor.

And at the center of this complexity lies the question which each of us must answer: Who is worthy of our allegiance? I have to tell you, the song which Diane Lund shared with me during Lent, which the choir sang today is *just right*. Not only because it is clearly based on this and other texts from Revelation, but because it is structured as a series of questions. They are questions that the early Christians must have asked themselves, but they are just as relevant to us today: Do you think the world is broken? We do. Do you feel the shadows

deepen? We do. Is the glory of the Lord to be the light within our midst? It is. Is it good that we remind ourselves of this? It is. I was at a Pastor's Sabbath at Camp Mack this week, and our leader reminded us that the task of the preacher is to re-frame reality: to take the world as we see it now and remind ourselves that this is not all there is. God may see something which we cannot see; when we look at the world in the light of God, we may see it differently. The glory of the Lord is to be the light in our midst. It's good that we remind ourselves of this because other people and other groups are trying to re-shape our reality in their own ways: the news media, politicians, anyone who is trying to sell you something is competing for your allegiance -- or at least your attention and assent.

Here's a question that wasn't in the anthem: if we think the world is broken, should we be working to fix it? We should. Can we fix it on our own? We can't. If our allegiance is to ourselves, our political parties, our nation, even our churches -- we are doomed to failure. No matter how hard we try, how good our intentions are, how much money we throw at the problem; we cannot save ourselves. We cannot create our own light: it comes from the glory of God. The only way to salvation for ourselves and for our world is to give our allegiance to the One who is worthy of blessing and honor and glory and power: the Lamb who was slain and the King upon the throne. Is he worthy? He is. Is he worthy? You know the answer: he is.

This is a reality we could stand to be reminded of any time, but it is especially appropriate in the Easter season when we hold in each hand the suffering of the cross and the glory of eternal life -- the imagery of Revelation steadfastly keeps these two in tension: it is the blood of the Lamb which makes the martyrs' robes spotless white. This doesn't make sense in a literal laundry kind of way, but it makes perfect sense in the Revelation world of suffering and glory. Where our loyalties are today will make all the difference in what eternity is like for us. Allegiance is not something to figure out after we die, it has everything to do with the choices we make while we are alive in this world. What will we worship? Money? Power? Security? Are we courageous enough to worship Christ even if it costs us money, power and security? Are we willing to pledge blessing, honor, glory and power to the Lamb upon the throne? Is he worthy? He is. Amen.