

Sermon Easter 3C May 1, 2022

Acts 9:1-9 Psalm 30 Revelation 5:11-14 John 21:1-21

In the name of God, who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen.

For twenty years, my father used to come north from Florida and spend the summer with us each year. It was a joy, and sometimes a challenge. He was mischievous, like his mother and father before him. Thankfully, I didn't inherit that family trait! He got into the habit of buying a NYS lottery ticket on lottery days, and stayed up late to watch Yolanda Vega pick the winning numbers from the spinning basket after the news, and afterward he would look at his ticket, then look again at the numbers, and exclaim "I just don't understand it!" It became a familiar family phrase. Well, if you were an ordinary, unchurched man-on-the-street, and someone read to you from the Book of Revelation, you, too, might wind up muttering "I just don't understand it!" If you had never had the privilege to hear of Jesus and his teachings, his life and death and resurrection, you, too, might have that skeptical reaction.

St. John, who certainly was no ordinary uninformed 1st century character, did, of course, know all about Jesus. If this John of the Revelation was indeed John the disciple and Apostle, then he had known Jesus personally and had been directly on-hand for all the signs and wonders. But still, even he is a bit baffled by the visions he is shown in this unveiling of the happenings in heaven. We heard today from part of chapter 5 of that last book of the Bible, but I'd like to take you back to the beginning of that chapter. John is being told about what he sees in this dreamy vision by a voice that sounds like a trumpet, and it shows him a scroll with seven seals. Written on this secret scroll, both front and back, are the details of God's dream for creation, the things which, in God's own word, should happen. And, of course, we churched people know that God's word isn't just ink-on-parchment, but that when God's word is said, then things certainly happen! Worlds are created, thunderclouds form, demons are scattered, people are forgiven and reconciled, and God's word, resounding through creation, unfolds the future.

But, here's the problem that day in heaven: The famous scroll is sealed, with not just one, but seven stubborn seals. Seven is the liturgical number for perfection, completion, and wholeness, and all seven must be broken in order for the content of the optimistic future to be revealed. And it will take someone who is really worthy to break the seven seals and set God's dream in motion. So, everyone in heaven is looking, searching for someone who might be worthy, and at first no one seems to fit the bill. It's a tragedy, and John himself is brought to tears. What an unfortunate loss; here we have the answer to life and the universe and everything, and it can't be unrolled and read! I just don't understand it! But John is told not to weep, for fortunately the Lion of Judah is coming to break the seals. The Lion of Judah! Now that must be something glorious to behold!

So, let me teach you another biblical Greek word. Last week I introduced the Greek word *zoe*, which means life. But a special, significant, vibrant, important, maybe even eternal kind of life. Today's word is *axios*, which translates as deserving, or worthy. Well, the Lion of Judah, John is told, has *axios*. He is indeed worthy to break the seals of the scroll. He comes to save the day, and all are excitedly watching for his entrance! And here he comes from stage right...but, wait, what is this?! The lion of Judah isn't like any lion John has ever seen or imagined...it is, of all things, a little lamb! And a lamb which the tyrants clearly have tried to slaughter! A ragged thing, its wool all matted with dried blood! This is the one who has *axios*?! This is the one for whom we've been waiting?! I just don't understand it. Even John, who is used to the upside down, or maybe rightside up world of Jesus, pauses at this puzzle.

But there it is, and all heaven breaks out in song. There are, in fact, some fifteen songs in the Book of Revelation, and in this one, the lyrics say "Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!" And then all creation, from top to bottom, loudly and triumphantly joins the chorus, "To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!" The hero of the Book of Revelation is the Lamb, as John will witness. Want to know what happens next? Well, stay tuned for our readings from this book during the next few weeks, or read ahead yourself. It's all in the last book of your Bible, and you may find yourself muttering 'I just don't understand it'.

Our great high priest, the Lamb who is strangely the 'Lion of Judah' has *axios*, but the biblical record is full of men and women whom God has made worthy for specific tasks. Take Paul, for example, about whom Gale read this morning. He was still known by his Hebrew name, Saul, when he was free-lance working for the authorities in rounding up and prosecuting those pesky new Christians. He was an enemy of the early church, feared by those who had come to believe in the power of Jesus the Lamb. You may remember our reading last week, when Peter and the other Apostles insisted that it was their God-given mission to tell the story of Jesus and his love even on the street corners in Jerusalem, despite persecution. Well, it was young Saul who held the cloaks of those who stoned the Deacon Stephen to death. Saul, or Paul, was a zealot against Jesus-talk; he was ruthless and persistent. But then one day, on the road which leads to Damascus, a light from heaven flashed around him and, understandably startled, he heard a voice saying "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" I just don't understand it!, poor Saul must have thought. That voice was Jesus, who went on to give Paul instructions on how to become worthy to become the famous missionary he was to be. Now, as you can imagine, it took some doing for the Apostles to accept him, to see his *axios*, but suspicious as they were, they, too, came to see the new fruit of his tireless labor on behalf of God's love.

And then there's Peter, the disciple, the rock upon whom Jesus had hoped to gather a community of faith. Peter, who, as predicted, betrayed Jesus three times during the night of that awful trial and torture. Was Peter still worthy to accomplish that task and be a leader in the movement? I just don't understand it! How could such an unreliable character be destined for such important leadership?? But Jesus has not given up on Peter, and in the post-resurrection story we heard in this morning's gospel, Jesus matches Peter's three betrayals with three questions to assess his *axios*. Actually, it's the same question asked three times: Peter, do you love me? Do you really, really love me? Do you love me enough to carry on my work and feed my lambs? Will you still love me enough in your older days when they lead you away to lay down your life for my lambs? All it will take, Peter, for me to find you worthy is a sincere profession of love. You are to be a rock of love, a fisherman with loving skill.

So, dear friends, take heart. Like all those characters we encounter in our scriptures, through Christ God wants to make us worthy, too. Worthy to carry on the sacred work, worthy to sing the praises alongside the heavenly chorus, worthy perhaps even to break the seals on our own scrolls, where all the opportunities and blessings of God's creative dream are written on our hearts. And in revealing and reading them, that they may be activated. So may we fall down in worship, singing with all the company of heaven and earth, "To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!" And then to show our unity with them, in defiance toward all tyranny, by saying with them "**Amen.**"