

# Keep on Singing!

Sermon by Pastor Patricia Geiseman

*Easter 3*

May 4-5, 2019

Revelation 5:11-14

Friday, I read in *The Daily Herald* that Peter Mayhew died. He played the shaggy, towering Chewbacca in some of the Star Wars films. Mayhew was recalled as a gentle giant, at 7'3" tall. He was perfect for the lovable character of Chewie, the sidekick to Han Solo and the co-pilot of the Millennium Falcon. In real life, Mayhew is remembered as being "a force for the good." He was active in various nonprofit groups and established a foundation devoted to alleviating disease, pain, suffering, and the financial toll of traumatic events.

I loved Star Wars, and Chewie was one of my favorite characters. I remember seeing the first film in 1977. Star Wars was wildly, wonderfully imaginative, creative and entertaining. The bar scene with the monster-like patrons remains memorable. Back then, the technology and story line seemed new and innovative, but the themes were old and timeless ... good/evil, light/darkness, right/wrong, true/false, past/future.

In so many ways it seemed futuristic, but George Lucas opened each film with the line, "A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away..."

Other films, drama, and TV series have come our way playing out these ancient battles: Star Trek, Harry Potter, Game of Thrones and, recently, the Avengers. In all of the magic and mayhem, intrigue and imagination, we wonder, "Who will win? Is there hope?"

In the Easter season lesson today, we read from the Book of Revelation, the last book of the New Testament and of the Bible. It doesn't read like a bedtime Bible story! No birth in Bethlehem, no parable of the Good Samaritan, no feeding of the 5,000 or Jesus welcoming little children. Not here.

Even though the scenes and symbolism are strange—and sometimes scary—the rich language and vivid imagery are the source for much liturgy and many hymns. No other book of the Bible has had more influence on Western music and art than Revelation! [1]

Revelation is apocalyptic in genre. It pulls back the veil (like Toto and the curtain) not so much on what will happen but what did happen in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. In Revelation, we are in the past, present, and future.

Revelation “is not a series of predictions to figure out, but a deeper than literal truth—a journey into God’s vision of hope for our world.” [2] It was written as encouragement to the faithful.

We join John of Patmos in imaginative time travel. John envisions a liturgy where animals and all living creatures join in cacophonous singing. Before the scene in today’s reading, a representative seer goes on a journey up into heaven, and then returns with an urgent message to the community. On this journey John sees the divine throne and God as the One seated upon it, surrounded by heavenly worshipers.

The clear message is about allegiance. Only God and God’s Lamb are worthy of our worship, not the Roman emperor or any imperial power.

This was a radical message for John and the first-century communities. Revelation pulls back the curtain to expose the fact that Rome is not the great power it claims to be. Rome must not be worshiped.

“Holy, Holy, Holy” . . . “Worthy is Christ the Lamb who was slain” . . . Real victory—real peace—does not come from *Pax Roma*, but *Pax Christi*.

The worship scene described in Revelation 5 includes creatures from everywhere! Everyone and everything is united in song. This is an inclusive and universal choir!

So, this Eastertide we are invited to again to be part of the great choir. To sing with those before us, and those with us, so loudly and surely that our voices will echo into the future.

The Great I AM, was revealed—unveiled—in Jesus of Nazareth. And comes to creatures and creation in LOVE as the LAMB: suffering and broken, struggling and bleeding.

The Force for the Good is not found in violence. Power is not gained through oppression.

The message of Revelation is that God is able to work with suffering. This is good news to those of us who know brokenness. This is good news we can experience and hold on to.

*You are the Body of Christ. Wounded and real.*

We celebrate and sing about this possibility and promise as we gather for worship, week after week. In worship, we sing liturgy (which means “work of the people”) and hymns. In worship, we join a *force for the good*.

I think a lot about the past and the future these days as our time together winds to a close. I ponder what it has meant to be part of this great choir of people all of these years.

Even as I pack up my office this month, I hope and pray for your ongoing presence here. I hope you will continue to take time to connect with the promises of the past, be willing to let the curtain be pulled back and reveal present struggles. Please remember and trust that God works with suffering. AND that the Forces that defy God are real!

Worship is central to our identity and mission as God's people. We gather for Word and Meal and are sent back to the battlefields of life to bring the Word that healing happens and hope can be restored.

Worshiping with you all these years has been enormously enriching. I have felt so connected ... with lovely liturgy! Harmonious hymns and assuring anthems! I have gained so much.

My mother likes traditional worship, traditional hymns, traditional choirs, and the organ. She took piano lessons for many years and sang in the choir at Redeemer for a long time. We sang hymns by heart as part of our bedtime prayers. My brother, Paul, stalled the final "goodnight" by asking for *one more hymn*. He sang "Beautiful Savior" . . . a lot! Those were the good ol' days, and I am glad to have had them. (The benefits of a Missouri Synod Lutheran childhood!)

My mother is quick to criticize more contemporary styles of worship and singing. She calls them "holy roller" music. My dad called the contemporary service at Redeemer. The "rah-rah" service."

Perhaps it is no big surprise that I have pushed back for years. (I am nicer now than I used to be!) Even last week, I said to my mother, "Mom, it's not '*holy roller*'; it is called contemporary."

"I suppose that's nicer."

"Yes. More accurate, too."

I agree that some new hymns have terrible theology, but frankly some old ones do, too. And, musically, some new songs may not be as well written. But . . . songs don't need to be two-hundred-years old to be worthy of singing.

My point (we could say argument) is people *need* to write new songs, people need to *sing* new songs. The Spirit who inspired Philipp Nicolai, Carl Schalk, Nikolai Gruntvig, and Franz Gruber has not died! We sing with Marty Haugen, Anne Krentz, Ray Makeever, Ken Medema. And our own Music Director, Kristin, writes songs for us to sing!

Over the years we have learned to sing new songs together. I am grateful for leadership, learning, and your willingness to join in.

In Revelation, we read that John weeps when he fears no one can open the scroll. No one is worthy. Peter wept bitterly after denying that he was a disciple of Jesus. He felt unworthy. And there are times we weep.

Revelation invites not only our song, but also our hearts. As we join in liturgy and hymns, we are aligned again with the transforming, purposeful love that was lived out in Jesus. We sing a story of hope, the story of Jesus, Peter, Mary, and John. As we sing, our story joins the song.

We are swept up in LOVE.

There are times we fear that no one can unroll the scroll. That no one knows or remembers the purposes of God, or cares any more. There are times we weep, feeling far from the love of the LAMB.

John tells us later:

See, the home of God is among mortals.  
He will dwell with them;  
they will be his peoples,  
and God himself will be with them;  
he will wipe every tear from their eyes.  
Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more,  
for the first things have passed away.”  
—Revelation 21:3b-4

*God works with suffering. We are God's hands.*

*Dear friends,* I encourage you to keep singing together in the great choir of the congregation. Sing ancient liturgy *and* new songs.

Reach out to each other in peace and compassion. Welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you. Make space for each other and for new people.

Encourage one another. In our sadness and suffering, the LAMB who unrolls the scroll of God's healing agenda, wipes away our tears, and we can sing.

We sing for ourselves and for those around us. Our voices echo into the future with hope for the world. We are part of the great choir, a force for the good. Together we journey into God's vision of hope for our world.

My life flows on in endless song above earth's lamentation,  
I catch the sweet, though far-off hymn that hails a new creation.

No storm can shake my inmost calm while to that Rock I'm clinging.  
Since Christ is Lord of heaven and earth,  
how can I keep from singing? [3]

And the living creatures said ... Amen!

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Resources

[1] Rossing, Barbara. "Commentary on Revelation 5:11-14," workingpreacher.org, May 5, 2019.

[2] Rossing, Barbara. "Commentary on Revelation 5:11-14,"

[3] Lowry, Robert. "My Life Flows On in Endless Song" (Hymn #763 in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*)

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### *Reflection Questions:*

- At St. Mark's we keep the church year. We sing liturgy that is ancient.

*How does the liturgy (the "work of the people") help connect you to God's ongoing agenda?*

- John weeps when he fears no one can open the scroll. Peter weeps when he denies Jesus. We weep.

*How does the love of the LAMB embrace you and assure you that you are worthy?*

- *How does the "holy communion," the great choir of the congregation, help heal, restore, encourage, and lift you up?*