

The Scroll and the Lamb

Then I saw in the right hand of the one seated on the throne a scroll written on the inside and on the back, sealed with seven seals, and I saw a mighty angel proclaiming with a loud voice, “Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?” And no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or to look into it. And I began to weep bitterly because no one was found worthy to open the scroll or to look into it. Then one of the elders said to me, “Do not weep. 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.”

Then I saw between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered, with seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. He went and took the scroll from the right hand of the one who was seated on the throne. When he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell before the Lamb, each holding a harp and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. They sing a new song:

“You are worthy to take the scroll
and to break its seals,
for you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God
saints from every tribe and language and people and nation;
you have made them a kingdom and priests serving^[c] our God,
and they will reign^[d] on earth.”

Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels surrounding the throne and the living creatures and the elders; they numbered myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, singing with full voice,

“Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered
to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might
and honor and glory and blessing!”

¹³ Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea and all that is in them, singing,

“To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb
be blessing and honor and glory and might
forever and ever!”

And the four living creatures said, “Amen!” And the elders fell down and worshiped.

Sermon Title: The Lamb, Our Reason for Hope

Text: Revelation 5:1-14

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I remind us of a sermon a few weeks ago where we discussed Revelation 1 and the Alpha and Omega. We discovered how our God is beyond all time and space while intimately involved with us. This infinite aspect of God's personality is made finite in the moment now. That we worship the God who is, who was, and who will be.

Keep that in mind this morning as we open our hearts and minds to seeking God's guidance in understanding our text. Upon reading it, the first thing we notice is who is invited into the grand display of heavenly worship. Everyone and everything is there! This point is critically important for us to consider and claim as our faith. The point is clear! That despite what we think or feel, God's judgement brings everyone together in worship! Not one person or creature is excluded!

This vision is quite different from Matthew 25, isn't it? Remember in Matthew's understanding of the Final Judgment, there is a separation of the sheep and goats. The sheep are on one side and the goats are on the other. And the litmus test that will determine if we are a sheep or a goat is how we treat those on the fringe. How do we remember the thirsty, the hungry, those needing clothing, those needing shelter, and those in prison. When we do it to the least, we've encountered Jesus, our Master.

In John's vision, the final judgement begins with a vision and in this vision, John is taken away and enters God's sanctuary. Once inside the heavenly vision, he sees the throne. Notice he doesn't tell us who sits on the throne. Rather, John describes this throne as the power of God. And the person (i.e., God) is sitting on the throne holding a scroll sealed with seven seals.

Notice John is upset because no one can open the scroll. With all this power and grandeur around the throne, no one in heaven or on earth is worthy to open it. As a matter of fact, John weeps because he believes the scroll, God's judgment, will remain sealed.

But an elder assures him that there is a worthy one. Then John looks for the Lion of the tribe of Judah. The mighty king of the jungle is what he expects to see, but John says he sees, kind of off to one side, a little bleating Lamb that was slaughtered. Notice our lamb is standing. Despite being slaughtered, this lamb still stands. Death cannot conquer this lamb. Feel the contrast? It's not what we expect. Beside the powerful throne of God is this bleeding little lamb. This slaughtered lamb is the only one who is worthy of opening the scroll. And here is our good news for today! Our elder tells him, "This Lamb is also God."

Amazing. Next to the powerful throne of God is the suffering love of God. In placing this lamb beside the throne, John wants us to understand that God is on the one hand Justice and on the other hand Mercy, on the one hand God is incredible in power and on the other hand God is intimate in love, above everything yet joining us in suffering sympathy. Friends, John's vision is important for us to remember and in our remembering we discover our hope. We need both these images of God and we must continually remember to hold them together in our minds.

Many churches (or people) split this image of God. What happens when we split the images we distort the economy of God's inner working. If we only use images of mercy, grace, and forgiveness associated with the bleeding Lamb, we come up soft in our understanding of God's work in this world. According to this way of thinking, we are ALL forgiven. We don't need consequences. Because of the bleeding lamb everything and everyone is okay. But we have a problem with this thinking, don't we? Bonhoeffer calls it cheap grace because with this view God's grace is easy. There is no justice in it or judgment. There's no affirming what is right and wrong.

We hear it many forms. We make up excuses for whatever others do. I remember one summer; I was visiting my cousin who is also named Ed. He's older and more like my uncle than a cousin. He retired from the railroad, but he wanted something to do. So, he decided to drive a school bus. Every morning, he would drive a school bus that picks up disabled children and took them to school. When I was talking to him, he told me about one particular 13-year-old girl who was in a wheelchair. She once could walk but now can't do what the other kids normally do - the running, the shouting, and the playing together. Ed, my cousin, starts off telling me about her with these words. He said, "She's mean. She's nasty to me and to others. In fact, she's bossy."

But immediately he follows up with a rationalization, "I can understand it though. After all, she's in a wheelchair, and she's probably acting out her frustration because she cannot play like the other kids. It's not her fault. She can't help herself."

Notice what Ed did. Ed covered for her, and that's what happens when we are all grace and mercy. We hide behind the illusion that our background, our context, and other factors gives us permission to do something wrong. Ed's words are our words, "It's not her fault." Grace becomes like melted ice cream. It tastes okay but it is missing something that makes ice cream.

In the past decade, we have been in a period of strong reaction against this form of cheap grace. Justice and judgment now reign. I first heard this judgement when Bill Clinton was running for office. His platform was 'Three strikes and you're out' as a political campaign theme. But where does that get us as a people and as a nation? We are now the world's leader in one area and that is our ability to build prisons like the one in Alligator Alcatraz. Our current atmosphere is harsh. There's no mercy, no grace.

Let me tell you of a time when I felt harshness most poignantly. I was a prayer meeting at the time of the Gulf War with Iraq, and people from all over Richmond, VA, came to St. Paul's Catholic church near Union Seminary. I was attending the prayer meeting as a class assignment. The worship space was crowded. We began the service with prayer and scripture readings. We sang some hymns and read more prayers. During one of the prayers, the priest prayed for all the men, women, and children of Iraq who would suffer and die because of our bombing them. When the service ended a gray-haired man came over to the priest and waved his finger under his nose. He said, "I don't want you to pray for those people! You are praying for the wrong people! You are not an American if you pray for them."

Praying for the wrong people! I couldn't believe it. But that is the atmosphere in many of our churches, isn't it? We have entered a harsh season of no forgiveness. The statements from this point of view sound like: "We must get rid of the illegals. We must protect our jobs and trade. We must... we must... we must... and all these oughts and musts and shoulds are important! For

if we don't act now, we're in danger of losing our morals as a church and as a nation. That's the reason we are declining as a church."

Friends, we are in a season of harsh judgment that's growing. We want justice and power without grace and mercy. It's an overreaction against too much grace in the 60's and 70's. But the harsh reaction without any grace means that God is all judgment. In other words, if the prodigal were to come home, (pause) we'd arrest him.

So, what does that mean for us this morning? Well, let me tell you that as I look out and bear witness to those who are gathered here in this sanctuary, what excites me is when I think of each of you. Just think of all the lives we touch in the Franklin area and the ripples we can create. Think of our homes, our schools, and our workplaces, we will be in tomorrow. With those relationships in mind, I am going to issue us a challenge. I'm just wondering, just imagining, what if we can hold together both parts of the image of God. Moral and ethical demand, of course, because there is the throne of justice. Yet there's also the bleeding Lamb. We need to keep both those images together. I know it's hard, but it can be done. Yes, it can. How do I know? Because I have experienced it first-hand.

When I was fifteen, I used to go outside and start the car each morning before going to school. Mother particularly liked me doing this on the cold mornings so that she could run out of a warm house and get into a heated vehicle.

I had been doing this for her for about 4 months when I got the bright idea that I knew how to drive. My grandfather, who used to own such things as bulldozers, and dump-trucks, I thought that I knew how to drive since I had been driving some of the heavy equipment since I was a teenager, but my cockiness soon ended with a loud crunch. As I put the car into gear, I proceeded to back out of the carport without carefully checking where I was going. CRUNCH!

Hopping out of the vehicle I ran to the passenger side to see that I had damaged the entire front fender by backing into a pole that supported the carport. Mother, much to my fear, came running out of the house to see what I had done. She said my accident shook the whole house. And then she said the phrase that is the dread of every kid ever growing up... "You wait until your father gets home and finds out what you did!"

That entire day I spent in constant anxiety and guilt. By the time the final school bell rang I was a nervous wreck, and I hung my head waiting for my dad to get home.

When I told him what happened, he just sat there for a while and then proceeded to go through the mail without saying a word. After what seemed to be an eternity, he spoke to me. He said, "Did you learn anything?"

"Yes," I replied. "I learned that I need driving lessons before getting behind the wheel, and that I need to be careful when I back out of the driveway."

He said, "Good! Cars can be dangerous and have the potential to kill people. I think you need to wait until you learn to drive before you start playing with the car." The same dad who was to deliver justice also offered me grace as my loving father.

So, do we think that we can hold them both together? Can we as God's people hold both justice and grace, harshness and mercy together? After all I am talking to a truly powerful group of people in this room! It's only you and I who can stop this split. It's up to us! We're the ones who can do it. Do you think we can? I'm sure we can!

To the one who is on the throne and to the Lamb, be all honor and power and glory and might. That's our reason for hope.