

In some ways it's appropriate that Revelation 5 begins with one man sobbing (v. 4), but ends with a powerful hymn from every creature in heaven and on earth singing, *“praise and honor and glory and power, forever and ever”* (v. 13). John, the seer of the Apocalypse, writes in verse 4, *“I wept and wept because no one was found who was worthy to open the scroll or look inside.”* What should he have expected? Crying our eyes out is what we followers of Jesus often experience. But it also follows an arc along which God is moving his beloved children. That's why in this passage we can see progression from sobs over an angel's question about who would open the scroll, to the astonishing outcome: *“Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, saying: ‘To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!’”* (v. 13).

This passage helps us set our sights on a heavenly picture of worship. Every nation, tribe, people and language joins in worship. All are united by the only thing that can bring fractured people together: Worship of the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Did you get that John? Did you hear God's answer to the angel's question? After spending chapters 2 and 3 explaining why the churches to which he writes need to hear Revelation's message, John basically begins to “reveal” what God is doing, not in the world in which those churches live, but in the heights of heaven.

Revelation 5 begins with grief because it would appear there is no one able to reveal God's plan for the redemption of God's creation. It seems as if John's tears flows from the fact that no one can figure out just what God is doing in the world that he has created. Chances are, some of us have been, and still are, wondering that same thing this morning. One of the heavenly elders, however, signals that there's no real reason for all this grief because of the triumph of the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David. He tells John that, *“He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals”* (v. 5). And, oh yes, he may not look the part because he's *“a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain”* (v. 6).

Only he is able to unlock the mysterious scroll that reveals God's plan for everyone and everything that God created. This announcement unleashes what we might call a rousing hymn, like the singing at Three Rivers stadium the last time Billy Graham came to town for a crusade. The imagery of chapter 5 invites God's beloved children to imagine this massive choir belting out a hymn in mezzo forte mode. The choir includes perhaps millions of angels who surround the living creatures as well as elders that encircle the Lamb, *“standing at the center of the throne”* (v. 6). It's a breathtaking scene that nearly defies human imagination or description. Yet it leaves us with the sense that every last

heavenly being is belting out their praises to Jesus the Lamb who gave everything to redeem every nation, tribe, people and language.

This massive, glorious choir sings three different hymns in Revelation 5 (in case you ever wondered why we usually sing 3 hymns in a worship service). The first praises the Lamb not only for redeeming his adopted brothers and sisters, but also making those siblings into *a kingdom and priests*. In verse 12 the second hymn offers to Jesus the Lamb who is worthy, “*Power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!*” In other words, all that the creation can muster.

I’ve been wondering about the word “worthy” that is so central to John’s vision. Walter Taylor says the Greek word *axios* (translated “worthy”) was a political term with which people of John’s day would have been very familiar. Taylor compares it to “Hail to the Chief” that the Marine band plays upon the entrance of the president of the United States. Historians say Roman crowds were expected to shout, “Worthy! Worthy! Worthy is the emperor!” when Rome’s emperor appeared in public. (*Preach This Week*, April 18, 2010)

Of what, then, does this majestic chorus claim is *axios*, “worthy?” Not the emperor! The Lamb. And absolutely everything about him. Even the number of attributes the chorus assigns to the Lamb—there are 7—affirms that. The number seven is, after all, one of the biblical symbols of completeness and perfection.

This grandiose hymn announces, as N.T. Wright notes, that “The wealth and strength of the nations belongs to him; everything that ennobles and enriches human life, everything that enables people to live wisely, to enjoy and celebrate the goodness of God’s world—all this is to be laid at his feet.” (*Revelation for Everyone*, Westminster John Knox, 2011, p. 57)

Verse 12’s hymn is the kind that lingers on the lips of us Christians who have recently passed through Holy Week’s passion of Jesus the Lamb and his crucifixion and then moves on to Easter morning’s “Christ is risen!” Who on earth can imagine a *slaughtered lamb* receiving all that praise...and more? I would say, only those whose imaginations are shaped by the Spirit of Jesus the Lamb.

And then, as if myriads of angels, heavenly hosts and elders just can’t muster enough praise, *every creature* somehow rises up to join them in the third hymn of praise in verse 13. Scott Hoezee says, “The real capper comes when every last *creature in the world*, including those in the deepest oceans, likewise rise up to sing the doxology. You’d expect God’s holy angels to sing a song to Jesus the Lord, but perhaps nothing so vividly shows

the scope of God's victory more than the fact that eagles and dolphins, jaguars and hummingbirds, sand hill cranes and elephants will also give the Lamb honor and glory and praise forever and ever."

The imagery of this Scripture reading is at times mysterious and breathtaking to me. Since its language is also apocalyptic, those of us who probe its meaning would do well to handle it with something of a "light touch." After all, its inspired truths come to its readers embedded in rich symbolism and lyric poetry. The proclamation of Revelation 5, then, may call for a more poetic, lyrical interpretation rather than a three point sermon and an anecdote.

While we 21st century Christians sometimes assume Revelation reveals secrets of the unseen world and the future, which it does, biblical scholars remind us that it was first addressed to Jesus' servant John and to his original recipients in the early church. Some scholars have focused on its application to John's contemporaries and the time of Christ's return. However, John didn't just speak Revelation for his contemporaries or for people near the end of time. He also speaks "*the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ*" (1:2) to every era, and to each adopted daughter and son of God. Revelation 5's eternal song of hope is for all those who want to follow Jesus into the future, contained in this scroll and mapped out by God.

It is, to say the least, a message that's appropriate for every time and place and people. The book of Revelation graphically describes the spiritual and political darkness that enveloped its first readers. However, we 21st century readers have also found ourselves wrapped up in all sorts of spiritual, social and political darkness. It's even tempting to suspect that the darkness may in the end win the day. But this Sunday's Scripture reminds Christians in all times and places that no social, political or spiritual force except that of the slain and risen Lamb is in charge and will win the final victory.

So those who are wondering, and rhetorically asking, "If the Lamb is worthy to receive the whole creation's power and wealth, doesn't he also deserve the offerings of *our authority and wealth*? If the Lamb deserves the whole creation's wisdom and strength, doesn't he also deserve to have *our wisdom and strength* devoted to him and the service of our neighbors? If the Lamb deserves all that honor and glory and praise, doesn't he also deserve *our wholehearted and unending worship and praise*?" Those are some of the relevant questions that arise from this Scripture for me.

The biblical theologian Elizabeth Achtemeier added a kind of "stewardship of creation" perspective on Revelation 5. She notes that when a species goes extinct, verse 13's

universal chorus shrinks. When someone wantonly takes even one human life, that chorus also becomes a little quieter. Might that not suggest that our own “hymns of praise” include being better stewards of all creation and all the creatures named in Revelation 5’s grand chorus? Taking that into consideration is still what some would call only “measured praise.”

In his thought-provoking book, *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker’s ABC* (HarperOne, 1993), Frederick Buechner references the topic of *praise* when he says, “The way the 148th Psalm describes it, praising God is another kettle of fish altogether. *It is about as measured as a volcanic eruption*, and there is no implication that under any conceivable circumstances it could be anything other than what it is.

“The whole of creation is in on the act—the sun and moon, the sea, fire and snow, Holstein cows and white-throated sparrows, old [people] on walkers and children who still haven’t taken their first step. Their praise is not chiefly a matter of saying anything because most of creation doesn’t deal in words. Instead the snow whirls, the fire roars, the Holstein bellows, the old man watches the moon rise. Their praise is not something they say, but something that they are. We learn to praise God not by paying compliments but by paying attention.”

Do we finally see that the weeping of John has become the praising of every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea? That’s why this passage progresses from sobs over an angel’s question about who is able to open the scroll, to God’s astonishing answer: “*Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, saying: ‘To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!’*” (v. 13).

Worship of the One who is “worthy of worship” will never end. But relax. This sermon *will* end. In fact, it ends with the words of Revelation 7:10. “*And they cried out in a loud voice: ‘Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.’*”

The grace of the Lord Jesus be with God’s people. Amen.

(Thanks to Doug Bratt for many sermon ideas)