

The Voice Of Many Angels

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on April 30, 1995, the third Sunday of Easter. Scripture Lessons: Acts 9:1-6; Psalm 30; Revelation 5:11-14; John 21:1-19.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

So many things can't be explained. Isadora Duncan was a great interpretative dancer in the early part of the 1900s. In her autobiography she says that she was often asked to explain what her dance meant. She responded, "If I could explain what it meant, I would not have to dance."

When we read the Revelation of St. John we invariably ask, "What does it mean?" John Calvin was perhaps the greatest commentator on Scripture that ever lived. His commentaries on the books of the Bible are still studied in seminary and by ordinary ministers. He had a way of expressing clearly and simply what biblical authors were saying. But John Calvin never wrote a commentary on the Revelation.

My guess is that if asked why, he would have said, "If you can explain it, St. John would not have written it the way he did."

And yet the Revelation is in the Bible for a reason - even if we can't understand it completely. ~~Even if we can't understand it completely,~~ we can understand the most important thing John is saying. ^(If you read the whole book) John is saying that all things past, present and future are in the hands of the God who has come to us in Jesus Christ. The key to the locked door of the mystery of the universe is Jesus Christ. And because of this Jesus, the crucified, alone is worthy to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honour, and glory, and blessing.

Many frightening things happen to us in this life. Things that we can't explain. Take dreams, for example. Sometimes I have a frightening dream. I wake

up shaking. I wonder what the dream means. My dream may contain strange and frightening creatures - as strange and frightening as the creatures we read about in the Revelation. I wake from my dream asking, "What does this dream mean?" I don't understand. It must have some meaning but I don't know what it is. All I have are guesses.^{For some people the dream} St. John knew what that's like. Some of the things he saw in his revelation frightened him.^T They frighten us when we read them today. But St. John believed, and the church in every age has believed, and I believe that Jesus Christ, the Risen Lord knows the meaning of this dreams and nightmares.

So many tragedies happen. Events that we can't understand - tragedies that seem to serve no purpose.^{oklahoma, Rwanda} About fifteen years ago, Dave Rife was playing baseball with his ten year old nephew. A storm came up suddenly. They both ran for cover. His nephew made it to safely. Dave was struck and killed by lightning. It was one of the most tragic events I have ever had to deal with as a minister. I sat out on the front steps with Dave's father - just sat there while his father sought in vain to make sense of the death of his son. He could not explain it - the tragedy remained a mystery - but Mr. Rife came through the tragedy believing and trusting and holding fast to his faith in the Risen Christ - he couldn't explain, but he could confess his faith in Christ whom he believe to have the answer - whom he believed would reveal to him the answer - if not in this world, then in the next.

The Revelation of St. John is like that - the beasts and plagues frighten us. We attempt to explain them - but we really can't. We don't have the key that unlocks the mystery of the Revelation. The one thing that we can understand,

though, is that ^{the Rise} Jesus Christ does have the key. ^{The church throughout the ages confesses that} Jesus Christ is able to open the sealed book of the mysteries of this life. He has the key to the mysteries of the universe. He IS the key. He knows the meaning of the tragedies and joys that we experience in this world.

Let me suggest a better way to deal with the Revelation of St. John. Let me suggest that we spend more time singing it than trying to understand it. ^{Did you} ~~Some things can't be understood without a commitment, e.g. chess, some things~~ ^{paint, dance,} know that some things can't begin to be understood until we sing. The Revelation of St. John is like that. So much of the Revelation of St. John has become the source for some of the church's greatest music. So much of the Revelation is meant to be sung. It's not meant to be explained. It's meant to be sung.

I sang in the A Capella choir of Newark High School when I was in tenth grade. One day we sang "Worthy is the Lamb" from Handel's, Messiah. I'd never heard it before. I'd never had much contact with classical music. We didn't usually listen to it on the radio. But our choir sang "Worthy is the Lamb."

I'd never heard anything so beautiful. I was singing some of the most beautiful music I'd ever heard. I couldn't believe that I was contributing to this beauty. I stopped singing for a moment. I simply listened. I heard the voice of angels. I couldn't believe that ordinary teenagers could sound so much like angels. I came as close to a religious conversion experience as I've ever had as we sang. I was in heaven. I was before God's throne. I saw the Lamb.

Listen again to what St. John heard and saw.

I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders. In a loud voice they sang: "Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and

glory and praise!" Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, singing: "To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!" The four living creatures said, "Amen," and the elders fell down and worshiped.

When I read these words I hear music. I hear trumpets and tympanis. I hear harpischords. I hear oboes. I feel things I can't explain. When I hear those words I want to lift my voice with the voices of a thousands and thousands and myriads and myriads of angels and sing,

~~Blessing and honor and glory and power,
Wisdom and riches and strength evermore,
Give we to Christ who our battle has won,
Whose are the kingdom, the crown, and the throne.~~

If I could have done it, instead of a sermon I'd've brought the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra from London, England to accompany Ann on the organ. And I would've brought the choir of Kings College Choir in Cambridge, England. And when it came time for my sermon I would've stepped aside and said just listen. If you really want to understand what John is saying hear, don't try to explain it - just listen.

Or if I could have done it - I'd have brought with me this morning an altarpiece from a beautiful Roman Catholic Church in Ghent Belgium. The altarpiece was painted by Jan Van Eyck in the early 1400s. It's entitled "The Adoration of the Lamb". A Lamb stands passively on a stone altar. The Lamb has his head turned towards us. The Lamb looks into our eyes. In his eyes we can see the light of a billion stars. And from the side of the Lamb pours fourth blood. The blood pours from the side of the Lamb like water pouring out of a faucet. A kneeling priest leans forward and fills a silver chalice with the blood from the side of the

Lamb. All around the Lamb men and women kneel – there hands clasped in praise.
And they're singing – singing to the Lamb.

If I could have done it, I'd've brought that work of art. I'd've placed it on the Communion Table. And instead of a sermon – instead of trying to explain what St. John wrote, I'd've invited you to come forward and behold the Lamb.

Sometimes we Presbyterians have a penchant to try to explain and define everything. This is one of the reasons I became a Presbyterian. I have a great hunger to understand and to explain the Christian faith. And I'm so grateful for that emphasis. But sometimes I worry that in trying to explain everything we end up explaining away everything. We have a tendency to clip the wings of wonder.

But sometimes we can't explain.

All we can do is sing.

All we can do is wonder.

All we can do is worship.

All we can do is praise God who has come to us in Jesus Christ – praise God that behind the mysteries of the universe and the tragedies of this world there is One who knows the meaning of it – who IS the meaning of it all.