

Worthy Is The Lamb

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the third Sunday of Easter, April 26, 1998. 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.

“Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honour, and glory, and blessing.” Revelation 5:11

First of all, I want you to hear angels and saints singing to the Lamb that was slain.

Listen! If you've ever sung Handel's Messiah you know how hard it is merely to *say* the words of this text because Handel's music keeps ringing in our ears. But what's really surprising is that the author of the book of Revelation heard any singing at all - at least not by saints and angels! John was a prisoner in a work camp on the rocky island of Patmos in the Aegean sea a few miles off the coast of Asia Minor. According to the Roman historian Pliny, the isle of Patmos was used by the Romans as a prison work camp. Life there was harsh and brutal. Alexander Solshenitzen, in his *Gulag Archipelago*, has described for us just how harsh and brutal prison camps still are.

John was on Patmos on a Sunday morning, the weekly celebration of Easter. In his mind he heard voices of saints and angels singing. Over on the mainland, the seven churches to whom he was writing were gathering in homes to sing praises to the risen Christ. John wanted to be with them but he was in prison. His crime was that he confessed Jesus as Lord - the only One to be worshipped - and not Domitian the Roman Emperor. Domitian reigned from AD 81- AD 96. He insisted on being called 'Our Lord and God'. He executed or banished anyone who wouldn't worship him, even members of his own family. Domitian was trying to bind together Rome's far flung, pluralistic, empire which embraced so many races, religions and cultures. But Christians would not compromise their faith. They recognized the risen Christ as Lord and God, not the Emperor Domitian. So they were persecuted and John found himself in a prison work camp. *And* on Sunday morning, the Lord's day, while he was in prison, he heard saints and angels singing.

I wonder if we'd be able to hear saints and angels singing under those conditions. John did! And that reminds us that the Easter faith is a singing faith. There can't be much of an Easter faith in our hearts without singing. The fact that the crucified Christ is the risen Lord

requires singing and has been the inspiration for the most beautiful choral compositions in the history of the world. Don't wait for your voice to get better before you sing. If you can't sing, then shout (And that's what I want you to do a little later)! If we all sang with *full voice*, like the saints and angels John heard, nobody would notice individual voices. And don't wait for your faith to be stronger before you sing. Our faith is strengthened when we sing. When Jesus left the Upper Room to go to go out to his betrayal and death, he sang. When Paul and Barnabas were in prison at midnight, they sang. The Scottish Covenanters in the 1600s walked to the scaffold singing praise to Christ. I was reminded on Holocaust Memorial day last Thursday of the Jews who walked into the Nazi gas chambers singing, "May God's name be blessed and magnified." When Kay's father was dying of cancer, Kay, her mother, and sister stood around his bed singing hymns of praise. What is it that enables people to sing under those conditions? The real question is *who* is it that enables us to sing? The Lamb that was slain - that's who inspires our singing. So, first, I want you to hear in your mind the voices of many angels and saints singing and later I want you to join your voice with their's.

Then, second, I want you, not only to hear, but to see what John saw. John not only heard, he looked. And when he looked he saw a Lamb that had been slaughtered. Surrounding the lamb he saw angels and elders and every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea. Jan van Eyck was a great Flemish artist. He was born in 1385 and died in 1441. In Van Eyck's famous painting entitled *The Adoration of the Lamb* he painted what John saw. It's part of a huge altarpiece which still hangs in a cathedral in Ghent, Belgium. When we look at the altarpiece our eyes are drawn to a sacrificial Lamb standing on the high altar. Blood is pouring from its side into a chalice. Angels surround the altar. In the foreground gushes the Fountain of Life. Coming from the four corners of the earth are the worshippers, prophets, martyrs, popes, virgins, pilgrims, knights, and hermits. The altar on which the Lamb stands is in a beautiful, lush meadow, and in the distance we see the heavenly city.

Remember, this painting is an altarpiece. It's on the high altar in the cathedral. So when the faithful come to the altar to receive Holy Communion they see the Lamb that was slain to

receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing. And they see the fountain of life made possible by the Lamb. They go away from the altar confirmed in their faith that Jesus Christ is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world and through his sacrifice they have eternal life.

But ~~when~~ John wasn't in a beautiful cathedral when he saw the Lamb. When he looked around he saw signs everywhere of the tyranny of Rome's empire. Everything about his surroundings cried out that Domitian was Lord. And it's always been that way? Egypt, Babylon, Greece, Rome, Spain, Great Britain, Nazi Germany, Soviet Russia, and now the United States. The world's empires come and go. These are the powers that rule the world. But John sees the world differently. John sees the world, not as it is, but as it shall be. Some people look at the world as it is and they say, *Why?* John looked at the world as it could be and said, *Why not?*

Jesus shall reign where e'er the sun
Does its successive journeys run,
His kingdom stretch from shore to shore,
Till moons shall wax and wane no more..

John saw a time when the kingdoms of the world shall become the Kingdom of Christ. The rise and fall of earthly empires is not an eternally cyclical pattern that will go on forever and ever. They'll all come to an end. History is working towards an end. When the end of history will be we don't know, but the message of the risen Christ is that in the end he will be seen to be what he in fact is; Lord of history and eternity.

In the late 1980s the Soviet Empire began to unravel. The Berlin wall came down. Freedom broke out in Eastern Europe as communism disintegrated. One of the more unusual displays of liberty took place in Czechoslovakia on November 27, 1989. Church bells hadn't been heard in that nation for 45 years but at noon that day every church bell in the country began to ring. A sign placed on the front lawn of a church in Prague summed up the joy of the moment. It read simply: *The Lamb Wins*. That triumphant message evokes a picture of what John saw on the island of Patmos, the Lamb that was slain. Christians believe that the Lamb

wins. One day his victory will be seen and acknowledged by every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea. Praise the Lamb!

I want us to leave the sanctuary this morning with a *picture* in our minds and *music* in our hearts. I want you to see Van Eycks, *The Adoration of the Lamb*, the Lamb standing on the altar with blood gushing from his side into the Holy Chalice. I want you to see what John saw, the Lamb that was slain to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing. Keep the picture in your mind!

And I want us to leave the sanctuary with the sound of loud praise in our hearts. I think of the closing scenes from the movie *The Apostle*. The credits are being flashed on the screen. But the epilogue continues. If you leave the movie too soon you'll miss it. We see Robert Duvall, the self-styled Apostle, working in a prison road crew. He's a prisoner, like John. He's working with other prisoners. And as they shovel dirt and sledgehammer rocks, the Pentecostal preacher leads them in an antiphonal chant. (And I need the help of the congregation and choir to help me with this): His praise-chant goes something like this.

Who was born of the Virgin Mary? *Jesus!*

Who healed the sick and raised the dead? *Jesus!*

Who ate and drank with sinners? *Jesus!*

Who was nailed to the cross on Good Friday? *Jesus!*

Who is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world? *Jesus!*

Who was raised from the dead on Easter Sunday? *Jesus!*

Who is the Way and the Truth and the Life? *Jesus!*

Who is King of kings and Lord of lords? *Jesus!*

Who alone is worthy to be praised? *Jesus!*

Who! *Jesus!*

Who! *Jesus!*

Let us pray: Worthy are you, O Lamb, to receive power and wealth, wisdom and might, honor and glory and blessing. Blessing and honor, glory and might be to you who sits on the throne and to the Lamb. Amen.