

Third Sunday of Easter
May 5, 2019
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Revelation 5:11-14

The Victory of God

Well, my brothers and sisters, today is my last day with you as your seminarian. As such, this is my last sermon at Holy Cross. And, while there are several good readings to choose from on this occasion, I would be remiss if I left this place without having preached on the book of Revelation.

Perhaps The Episcopal Church's most disfavored book in the Bible, Revelation shows up a meager six times in the entire three-year lectionary. And while Revelation is seldom ever read in our churches, it is preached on even less.

We dislike Revelation because it is so graphically violent, sexually charged, and monstrous in ways both literal and figural. But, then again, so is Game of Thrones, and half of us will rush home to watch that tonight. I humbly suggest that if we can stomach the brutality surrounding the Iron Throne, then we are more than able to handle the apocalyptic elements surrounding the Heavenly Throne in the book of Revelation.

The first thing we need to know about the book of Revelation is that it is not primarily about the future. The apocalyptic events that John of Patmos describes actually lay behind him in time.

An apocalypse is simply an unveiling of something hidden. And what Revelation unveils is the victory of God hidden in the historical events of the cross and the empty tomb – in Christ's death and resurrection. Or, to say it another way, the book of Revelation is the Gospel as seen from heaven.

The passage of Revelation that we read this morning contains two hymns of praise, one to the Lamb and one to both God and the Lamb. And both of these heavenly songs belong to a larger section in the book that begins at the start of chapter five. It is in those first ten verses that John describes a scroll with seven seals that contains the destiny of the cosmos within it.

This scroll is actually an imperial proclamation. In John's day, the Roman emperor would dispatch these kinds of scrolls to announce a military victory. So, the scroll that John describes in the book of Revelation is a divine proclamation from the cosmic emperor, announcing God's ultimate victory. And, just like the proclamations from Rome, this scroll can only be opened and read by one with proper authority. But John weeps because no one is found who can open the scroll and its seven seals.

But as his tears fall to the floor of the heavenly throne room, John hears an announcement: Behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered... he is worthy to open the scroll and to break its seven seals. But when John trains his eye on this worthy Root of David—this one who bears messianic titles—he sees not a Lion, but a Lamb, standing as if it had been slain. And it is this slain one who takes the scroll and breaks open its seals.

The two hymns of praise in our reading this morning are a response to the unveiling of this Lamb's sovereign authority. This slain one, of course, we know is Jesus. And the hymns sung to him proclaim a central Gospel truth: God is not an apex predator red in tooth and claw, but a victim stained by its own blood. To say it more clearly: God does not conquer like Caesar through bloodshed; God conquers in Jesus, shedding of his own blood.

And this is of critical import for us because it makes clear that the sequences of calamities that follow in the book of Revelation do not describe God's violence, but our human violence and God's victory over it through the nonviolent death and resurrection of Jesus.

During this Eastertide, we redefine what it means to win—to conquer—in light of the cross of Christ: victory does not belong to the ones who inflict wounds. It is not gained through our own physical might or personal fortitude. Victory is a gift received only from the God who Himself knows what it is to be wounded. This is exceedingly good news for us who so often bear our wounds in secret and in silence, or who lack recourse for the wrongs we have suffered.

But the unveiling of God's victory in Jesus Christ turns the worlds' notions of power on their head in yet another way. Those songs of praise answer a timeless question: Who is worthy of worship? In so many words, the heavenly chorus replies, "Those things that Rome takes for granted—power, wealth, wisdom, might, honor, glory, and blessing—actually belong to Jesus." Who is worthy of worship? Heaven cries out, "Worthy is the Lamb..."

When Revelation assigns worship to Jesus, it dethrones the rule of violence in our own lives. These songs of praise proclaim the ultimate sovereignty of the Lamb, over and against 'the one on the throne' in Rome—or in Washington, or wherever.

Indeed, these hymns of praise illustrate the political implications of worship: worship names that which is worthy and, in so doing, dismisses all competing claims upon our loyalty made by other things—be it nations or personalities.

And I think that's the real reason Episcopalians don't like the book of Revelation: it deeply offends the polite cultural barrier we set up between our religion and our politics. Revelation confronts us with the fact that our religion is political.

When we are here in church worshipping the crucified and risen one, we're making the most profound political statement a person can make: Jesus is Lord, Caesar is not. When we acknowledge the victory of God, we also acknowledge the defeat of all the worldly powers that set themselves up against His victory.

Now, that's a difficult thing to accept in its own right, but it's all the more difficult to accept when the worldly powers don't seem all that defeated.

An apocalypse is an unveiling of something hidden. Sure. And what is hidden is God's victory in the cross and empty tomb of Christ. Yes. But where is this hidden victory to be found?

A mere glance at the headlines is sufficient to see that our world is still dominated by violent Caesars. Where is God's victory in the midst of their ceaseless bloodshed?

This is not only our question; it was also the question of the seven churches to which John of Patmos addressed the book of Revelation. Those churches were being severely persecuted for their political faith, and they wanted to know: When is God going to set things right? When will God's victory finally be realized in history? In his vision, John locates that victory in two places.

First, he locates it in church. While Revelation is seldom ever read in our churches, it is enacted every Sunday. Like those seven churches that John wrote to, we live Revelation in every Eucharist we celebrate! When we gather, Christ is enthroned upon the altar in the bread and the wine. Songs are sung, prayers are offered, and we come into the presence of our King. The liturgy of the Church makes real the victory of Christ in the midst of a world full of calamities. It is in our Sunday worship, that the Lamb's reign is experienced and made visible here-and-now.

Second, John locates the victory of God in the end of history. While Revelation is not primarily about the future, it does anticipate the consummation of God's Kingdom at the close of the age. The final verses of chapter five we read this morning actually point forward to chapter 21, when the Lamb is co-enthroned with God as King and Lord of a new heaven and a new earth. It is at that future moment, when God renews the whole creation, and the faithful will be raised with new bodies, that God's victory will finally set the world right.

And that, my brothers and sisters, is the promise of the Gospel—the promise of Easter. And Revelation makes it clear that nothing—no earthly throne, no fearsome dragon, not even Death itself—can challenge such a total—such a wonderful—victory.

Now, this is normally where I say amen, but allow me one more word before I leave this pulpit. My family and I never say “goodbye.” In its modern usage, goodbye has a certain weight of finality to it. And for us, as believers in the resurrection, goodbye always seems like an inappropriate farewell. For no journey, across any distance of space or even across the threshold of death, can prevent us from seeing one another again. Parting is always temporary between Christians. So, instead, we always say, “See ya later.”

Now, as I mentioned earlier, today is my last day at Holy Cross. For the past two years, this place has become a second family to me—a home away from home. We have formed friendships together, shared meals together, and prayed for one another.

And this place has helped raise me up for ministry: challenging me to grow and comforting me in hardship. Holy Cross has left an indelible mark on my ministry that will shape my work in the church for years to come. Needless to say, today will be difficult.

But, on this day as we bid each other farewell, I will not bid you goodbye. For, whether in this world or in the world that John saw, we will see one another again.

So, instead, to this place and to all of you, I will simply say, “Thank you, so much... And see ya later.”