

New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario
Sunday, April 10, 2016
Megan Shin
Revelation 5:11-14; Psalm 30; John 21:1-19
“The Humble Servant”

“Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered
To receive power and wealth and wisdom and might
And honor and glory and blessing!”
“To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb
Be blessing and honor and glory and might
Forever and ever!” (Rev 5:12b-13b)

What an incredible description of worship – the splendor of the divine throne, the glorious court that surrounds the throne, and the multitude of all the creatures, heavenly and earthly, honoring and praising God. And yet there is something disturbing about this text. Perhaps we heard this text enough times to get used to it. But “Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered” - That is a very unusual subject of praise.

In chapters before, John sees a scroll in his vision – this scroll is held by “the one seated on the throne” and this is the scroll that explains the final events of human history, and once the opened, it will set those events in motion. And just a few verses before our reading today, one of the elders announces who can open this scroll; it is “the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David.” The one who has the power to set in motion the final events of human history is a lion. And yet, John looks and sees not a lion but a “Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered.” And following this recognition of the lion, or the lamb, is the incredible praise and worship that goes to God and the Lamb.

Jesus Christ is described as the lion and the lamb – the most powerful and the most defenseless. These two descriptions of Jesus that seem to be conflicting and incompatible, perhaps that is precisely what describes Jesus’ death on the cross and his resurrection.

Jesus’ rising from the dead has many dimensions of meaning to it. To name just a few, first, there is a cosmic dimension. The resurrection of Christ is the beginning of God’s new world – the new world that provides hope for individuals and communities, and one that extends to the whole cosmos. It gives hope for the cosmos groaning, that it will be set free from its bondage (Romans 8:21-22). It also has political dimension to it. The fact that Christ was raised challenged the authorities who had killed him. It was political dynamite – that the Son of God showed his triumph over all injustice and violence, and proclaimed his victory. These are just two of the messages that the resurrection speaks to us. They tell us how grand, powerful and victorious the resurrection of Christ is.

And yet, the resurrection is not possible without death in the first place. There is Christological dimension to the resurrection, which reminds us that Jesus is the crucified one as well as the risen Christ. He was a humble servant of God, who assumed our flesh, served humanity with humility, and was obedient even unto death on a cross. He emptied himself entirely, that he may experience the complete fullness of life. He was killed that he may show the power of the resurrection. He loved and served people around him although he knew that he would be betrayed – he loved them until the end of his ministry. And even after his resurrection, Jesus did not come as the almighty King, but came to the disciples to serve and guide them before his departure.

Our reading from the Gospel of John is about this post-resurrection time, after Jesus' resurrection and before his ascension. This was a time of confusion and darkness for the disciples. They have gone through a lot in the past. Their lives were turned around when they started to follow Jesus. They left their families and their work and followed Jesus – sometimes they were excited, sometimes worn out, hungry and thirsty, sometimes they were filled with awe, sometimes they simply did not understand what Jesus was teaching. Their journey with Jesus was a special stage in life that was set apart from the past.

And the last week of Jesus' life must have been an overwhelming week for the disciples, with a series of shocking events. This is how reverend Gary D. Jones puts it:

“For the disciples, the general landscape of life over the last week of Jesus' life had been overwhelming. The tension-filled, emotional high of their entry into Jerusalem was followed by extraordinary events in the temple, a Passover meal unlike any other, an intense experience in the Garden of Gethsemane, an unexpected betrayal, an armed arrest, a series of unexpected denials, a mock trial, a jeering mob, and a bloody execution. Surely in the hours following Jesus' death, the disciples were crushed and numb. The human spirit can take only so much. Then came the events that brought an emotional overload of another sort altogether – news of the empty tomb and resurrection appearances that had to be seen to be believed. These events would not only overwhelm and change the lives of the disciples forever; these events would change the entire world forever.” (*Feasting on the Word Year C. Vol. 2*, Louisville; WJK, 2009, pg 422)

That is a lot to absorb for the disciples. And in addition to this emotional overload were personal inner struggles. Take Peter for an example. He betrayed Jesus three times after he promised Jesus that he would never betray him even unto death. When Peter made this promise, he was not lying. He was filled with conviction. And later, he realized that he did not only fail Jesus but he had failed himself. He was weaker than he thought. Yes, Jesus resurrected, but what was Peter supposed to do with himself now?

All the disciples were probably going through what Peter was going through. Jesus they had followed came back from the dead. And so what now? They had abandoned their former ways of living to follow Jesus. They went where Jesus went, they didn't have to make much decisions about where to go and what to do. And now that they are not following Jesus any more, what now? And now that they have seen all the things that God has done, and all of their own weaknesses, how they all fled and abandoned Jesus when he was captured, what now?

Well, they didn't know what to do. "I am going fishing" Peter said – that is his former life, it's about the only thing that he knows how to do well. And they fish all night, yet catch nothing. Worn out and feeling lost, they continue to fish. And then appears Jesus, though they do not recognize. And they listened to this man who told them to cast the net to the right side of the boat. And then, when they caught 153 fish, one of the disciples recognizes Jesus and said "It is the Lord!" What a relief it must have been. In the middle of such inner turmoil, they saw that Jesus was with them!

One question I always had when I read this passage was, so where was Jesus all this time? Why didn't Jesus stay with the disciples after the resurrection and eat with them, stay at their places and teach them as he did before? Why did he "appear" three times, instead of just being with them?

Perhaps, he did that on purpose. Perhaps, the disciples needed to be on their own, so that they can try to navigate this foggy night, go through all kinds of emotions and thoughts, look back and try to make sense of what happened, what to do now, and what their heart's true desires are. Perhaps, Jesus had to keep his distance so that they can go through this process on their own.

And then came Jesus, he had never abandoned them. He had left them for a time period. He came, he served them with food, he served them by his nurturing presence, reminding them of times they have spent together.

And he makes sure he talks to Peter, one who is probably the most confused and hurt. It was an act of grace, that Jesus didn't simply tell him "Peter, I forgive you." But he asks whether Peter loves him three times, letting Peter know for himself that he really does love Jesus. After his own conviction had failed him, Peter is still able to say "Yes, You know that I do love you." And Jesus gives Peter direction in life, before he departs this world, that he is called to be a shepherd now, to feed and tend his sheep. Peter was called once again in his life, first as a disciple and now as a shepherd that feeds and nurtures God's people.

Can we put all these images of Jesus together. Jesus as the powerful lion, and the lamb that was slain, and a shepherd who tends his sheep and now calling his sheep to be the shepherd. Jesus, our King and God's humble servant. – all this, he had done because he loved the world.

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