

Follow the Lamb

Revelation 5:11-14; John 21:1-19
The 3rd Sunday of Easter - April 10, 2016
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[SLIDE 29] We return to the book of Revelation where in a series of vision reports the prophet John shows us who Christ is, where Christ is, what Christ is doing, and what Christ will continue to do. The point of these visions is to help us understand what it means to follow Jesus. Last Sunday's reading introduced us to Christ, the faithful witness, the first-born of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth (1:5), the *pantokrator* - the lord of all creation — who loves us, freed us from bondage to sin, and made us a kingdom of priests.



[STEP 1] In a second vision report John describes the risen Christ standing in the midst of seven lamp stands, holding seven stars in his right hand, with a sharp two-edged sword issuing from his mouth. The seven lamp stands represent churches, the stars represent the spirits or planets ancients believed controlled the fate of humanity (1:9-20). This vision expresses the reality that the risen Christ is present in the midst of his people, and that the risen Christ is the spiritual force at work throughout the universe. The risen Christ's message to his followers is: "Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, the living one. I was dead, and see I am alive forever and ever; and I have the keys of Death and Hades" (1:17-18).



Today's reading provides a glimpse into that alternate reality we call heaven. God is seated on a throne and is holding a scroll sealed with seven seals (5:1). A mighty angel searches for someone who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals, but no one is found to be worthy. The prophet John begins to weep as he realizes that if the seals are never broken, God's plan for the defeat of evil and the full coming of God's reign will never happen. An elder tells him not to weep because the lion of Judah has conquered and is worthy (5:2-5). John turns expecting to see a great roaring lion that will tear open the scroll with its teeth and claws, **[STEP 2]** but what he sees instead is an *arnion* - a little lamb, a lambkin, a lamby-baby - standing as if slain.

As this fluffy, little lambkin takes the scroll from the right hand of God, twenty-four elders representing the twelve tribes of Israel and the twelve apostles of Jesus, each holding a harp and a bowl of incense breaks into a new song praising the lamb:



You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God saints from every tribe and language and people and nation; you have made them to be a kingdom and priests serving our God, and they will reign on earth. (5:9-10).

This song of praise is followed by a multitude of angels, too many to count, singing with full voice:

Worthy is the lamb that was slaughtered to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing (5:11).

Then, every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them joins the heavenly chorus singing,

To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!

Just try to imagine the look on the prophet John's face. Not only has he just discovered that musical theatre was invented in heaven — there are fifteen choruses like this in the book of Revelation. Even more importantly he has just discovered that the hero of the great drama of salvation is a little lamb — a fluffy little lamby-baby that has been slain but somehow is still standing.

The word *arnion* — little lamb — is used 28 times in the book of Revelation to describe Christ. It is the central symbol for Christ in the book of Revelation. It is a beautifully paradoxical image, and a powerful metaphor. Christ, the true lord of all creation rules in a way that is dramatically different from the emperors who were being hailed as lords and gods and saviors of the world. Roman military theology proclaimed that Rome's victory in wars was what made peace and prosperity possible throughout the known world. Rome's conquering emperors were simply agents of the gods, and to oppose them was to court divine wrath. The book of Revelation challenges the Roman imperial cult of military conquest with the symbol of the lamb who was slain.

[STEP 3] A little lamb is a symbol of innocence, gentleness, vulnerability, weakness, and even helplessness. A little lamb that has been slain is a victim of violence, a sacrificial offering to appease angry gods, to induce them to take your side. But what does it mean when the little lamb that was slain is still standing? What does it mean when the little lamb that was slain and is still standing is actually the lord of all creation?



Barbara Rossing, in her book *The Rapture Exposed*, calls this “Lamb Power.” She writes, “the Lamb of Revelation became the victor not by militaristic power and slaughter but by *being slaughtered*. From beginning to end, Revelation's vision of the Lamb teaches a “theology of the cross,” of God's power made manifest in weakness ... Lamb theology

is the whole message of Revelation. Evil is defeated not by overwhelming force or violence but by the Lamb's suffering love on the cross ... God's people are called to conquer not by fighting but by remaining faithful, and by testifying to God's victory in self-giving love" (p. 111).

The symbol of the lamb who was slain and yet still stands redefines the whole concept of power and might. In the Roman world, the strong and mighty exercised power **over** others, coercing, threatening, or physically beating them into submission. Lamb Power is about the strong and mighty exercising power **for** others, using their gifts and their strengths for the common good, for the benefit of those who are in need.

Lamb Power is what Jesus does everywhere he goes. In our gospel lesson today, following the death and resurrection of Jesus, the disciples have returned to Galilee and their former lives. They are now as they were in the beginning fishermen harvesting the resources of the lake, and not having much success, until Jesus shows up. Lamb Power transforms lack into abundance, moves despair into hope, replaces abandonment with restoration of relationships. The disciples' empty nets are filled to overflowing. **[STEP 4]** Peter gets a second chance, and a new purpose for his life. The directionless community of believers, whom Jesus calls sheep and lambs, receives a shepherd to feed and tend them.

This scene between Peter and Jesus on that beach was my ordination text — quite appropriate for a person who had spent almost 25 years working hard to avoid God's call to word and sacrament ministry. I was a slow learner. All too aware of my weaknesses, my vulnerabilities, and my limits I was quite certain that ordained ministry was beyond me. Something happens, however, when you realize that the one who calls you to nurture and nourish the lambs, is also the one who identifies as a little lamb. Somehow, when the lamb who was slain calls a weak and vulnerable lamb to feed and tend other weak and vulnerable lambs you start to think it might be possible. It is really hard to put into words.



What I can say is this. We are all lambs. We may not all be innocent. We may not always be gentle. All of us do have vulnerabilities and weaknesses, and we all experience moments of helplessness. The good news is that we are lambs who belong to the Lamb who was slain and still stands, and who gives us gifts and strengths for the sake of our neighbor and our world. Like Peter, we are all called to "follow" Jesus by exercising our strengths as Lamb Power in our homes, in our workplaces and schools, in our associations and neighborhoods.

Please pray with me:

Lamb of God, help us to love you and to love one another, even as you have loved us. Amen.