

Shepherd Me, O Lamb of God

Psalm 23; Revelation 7:9-17; John 10:22-30

The 4th Sunday of Easter - April 17, 2016

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[SLIDE 29] Last Sunday, our reading from the book of Revelation introduced us to the hero of the great drama of salvation — the lamb of God, who was slain and yet remains standing. In the great cosmic battle between good and evil, God’s secret weapon is Lamb Power! Lamb Power is this strange notion that the strong and mighty exercise power **for** others, using their gifts and their strengths for the common good, for the benefit of those who are in need. This morning we turn again to the story in Revelation.



As you remember, the Lamb appears as the only one worthy to open the seven-sealed scroll in God’s right hand. In between last week’s reading and our text for today, the Lamb opens each seal. One of the four living creatures around God’s throne says, “come,” and a vision emerges.

[STEP 1] In succession John sees a white horse ridden by a crowned conqueror, a red horse whose rider makes war, a black horse whose rider carries a set of scales and inflates the price of wheat and barley, and finally a pale green horse whose rider brings famine, pestilence and death. These are the famous four horsemen of the apocalypse (6:1-8). They represent Rome and the consequences of its imperial policies. These visions are intended to say: these are the consequences of glorifying military conquest: endless warfare, economic havoc, famines and epidemics, death and destruction. The opening of fifth seal reveals the victims of imperial policies, crying out for justice (6:9-10). When the sixth seal is opened, earthquakes and other natural disasters send everyone — from the highest kings and generals to the lowest slave — into hiding imagining that the end of the world has come upon them (6:15-17).



In the midst of all this death and destruction, John sees that God’s angels are busy protecting the earth and the trees, and marking the servants of God with a special seal on their foreheads (7:1-8). That is where this morning’s reading picks up.

[STEP 2] John looks up and sees a great multitude that no one can count, made up of people from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages. They are standing before the throne and before the Lamb, proclaiming “Salvation belongs to our God and to the Lamb!” This multitude too great to count is dressed in white robes and carry palm branches. They are identified as people who are coming out of the great ordeal. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the



Lamb. The imagery is a tad gory, but points to baptism and the forgiveness of sins. This multitude too great to count worships God and is sheltered by God. They will hunger and thirst no more, no burning sun or scorching heat can touch them because the Lamb is their shepherd guiding them to springs of living water where God will wipe away their tears.

What is revealed in the scroll is that there are two great dramas playing out on earth: the drama of empire and the drama of the Lamb. The path of imperial power leads to death and destruction, the way of Lamb Power leads to life and wholeness. The challenge for John's readers, then and now, is to discern which drama they are invested and engaged in. Are they/we drawn to a life committed to seeking imperial power over others in our homes, workplaces, schools, associations and neighborhoods? Are they/we victims of imperial power, enslaved to things that are not-god, to things that are pushing and shoving us toward death and destruction? OR ... Are they/we drawn to a life of exercising Lamb Power, of using our gifts and strengths for the benefit of others, to lift up and benefit the least, the last and the lost wherever we find them? Are they/we finding shelter and strength in the Lamb who yearns to shepherd us into new life?

A similar question emerges in our Gospel lesson, where we hear Jesus say to his Judean audience, "you do not believe because you do not belong to his sheep" (10:26). Whoa! Jesus is saying to these people that they don't believe because they don't belong to his sheep. Is that possible? Are there really people in this world who are not Jesus' sheep? Is that why you have a hard time believing? Is that why you don't or can't hear the voice of Jesus? Could it be that some of us aren't really Jesus' sheep? **[STEP 3]**

[STEP 4] Jesus says he knows his sheep and that no one is able to snatch them away from him because God has given them to him. So if God gives the sheep to Jesus, could it really be possible that God chooses not to give some people to Jesus? Is it possible that there are some people who do not and will not ever belong to God and the Lamb?



Two things that I read this week, lead me answer no. First, I was reminded that in Luther's theology God's choosing of the sheep is a present-tense reality that is immediate and on-going.¹ God has been choosing you and me, our neighbors, strangers and foreigners, and yes even our enemies in every moment of our lives. God is choosing you right now here this morning and God will continue to claim you for the flock of Jesus tomorrow and the day after and the day after right through eternity. This means that there are no people anywhere that God does not choose, that God does not love, that God does not yearn to save.

¹David Lose at <http://www.davidlose.net/2016/04/easter-4-c-the-electing-word>.

Second, I was reminded again that all humans everywhere are “created in the *image and likeness* of God” (Genesis 1:27). To borrow the words of Richard Rohr:

The word "image" describes our *objective* DNA that marks us as creatures of God from the very beginning. It is the Holy Spirit living within us as a totally gratuitous gift from the moment of our conception. "Likeness" is our personal appropriation and gradual realization of this utterly free gift of the image of God. We all have the same objective gift, but how we subjectively say yes to it is quite different. We already have image; we choose likeness.²

So... I am tempted to sum up the meaning of Jesus' words something like this: you struggle to live in my likeness, to exercise your Lamb Power, because somewhere deep down you don't really believe that you are one of my sheep, created in my image.

The good news is that every human being, without exception, belongs to God and the Lamb simply by virtue of being created in the image of God. The good news is that God chooses us every day, claiming us for the flock of Jesus over and over and over again. I need to be reminded of that because at the end of each day as I look back over my words and actions, all too often I realize that I have not been very Christ-like, that I did not exercise Lamb Power. All too often I beat myself up for not living up to standards set by others. I find it difficult to close my ears to a culture that tells us to be afraid, evoking fear and hatred at every turn. I find it impossible to exist outside the structures of our society that make life good for me but miserable for others. The vision of revelation reminds me that in the midst of all that, God's angels are busy at work, that the Lamb is my shepherd, sheltering me even in the midst of the deepest darkness, leading me to life-giving waters. Knowing that I belong to God and the Lamb helps me to listen for Jesus' voice in the midst of a noisy world. Knowing that nothing and no one will ever be able to snatch me away from God and the Lamb gives me hope, and courage to try again tomorrow.

Please pray with me: Lord Jesus Christ, our good shepherd, you give us new birth in the waters of baptism, you anoint us with oil, and you nourish us at your table with heavenly food. In your goodness and mercy, dispel the shadows of evil and death, and lead us along safe paths, that we may rest securely in you and dwell in the house of the Lord now and forever, for your name's sake. Amen.

² Richard Rohr's Daily Meditation: Giving Birth to God, Friday, April 15, 2016, from cac.org