

The Earth is the Lord's

The readings in the Revised Common Lectionary during Eastertide this year give us a couple of different ways to continue our exploration of the character of Jesus and the meaning of his death and resurrection. In the place of readings from the Old Testament during this season, we have readings from the Acts of the Apostles, continuing the narrative of the history of God's people past the resurrection and the coming of the Holy Spirit into the hearts of believers and into the spread of God's Good News to the very heart of the Empire. These readings have the quality of "You Are There" documentary, written as they were by an eyewitness to much of Paul's missionary activity and filled out by stories that Luke must have heard from other eyewitnesses. The readings from the Gospels and from what would normally be an epistle, however, have a different quality altogether. The Gospel readings all come from the Gospel According to John, surely the most theological and mystical of the four Gospels, and the "Epistle" readings are from The Revelation to John, possibly the most peculiar book in our whole Bible. In these readings, we find less emphasis on storyline, even in John, and more on interpretation, generally expressed in far more poetic and imaginative language than the journalistic style of Luke. To get at the truths expressed about Jesus in these books, we must be prepared to set aside a search for facts and instead follow the imagery the author uses to express concepts that exist on the very periphery of human knowledge – how can we express the characteristics of an infinite God with finite language?, what does it mean for that God to become flesh?, what is the ultimate fate of humankind and the rest of creation?, and so on.

I mention this because I think it is important, any time we pick up the Book of Revelation, to remember that we are dealing with an imaginative piece of writing belonging to a very particular genre. This is apocalyptic, a poetic and wild type of writing aimed at communicating hope to a people living under persecution, when plain talk against the authorities could result in death for writer and reader alike. John the Revelator makes it clear from the outset just what sort of book he is writing when he says in verse 10 of chapter one, "I was in the spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet..." The contents of the book are a vision, as full of strange and suggestive imagery as a dream, as the very first simile of a voice like a trumpet would imply. We cannot read this final book of the New Testament literally but we must grapple with the important truths contained in it.

With that caveat noted, I want to explore this short passage from Revelation this morning with a couple of objects in mind. First, what can we learn about Jesus in this third Sunday of the Easter season and, second, how does the understanding of this passage direct and encourage us to encounter our world in the week leading up to the secular but highly appropriate observation of Earth Day?

Let's begin by unpacking some of the Revelator's coded message about Jesus. At this point in John's vision, the scene is Heaven. Had we read the first ten verses of chapter five, we would have learned that the One on the Throne, God, holds a scroll sealed with seven seals. An angel searches for someone who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals, but no one is found who is worthy. By implication, 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. Realizing this, John begins to weep bitterly but one of twenty-four elders at the throne (who represent all of Israel and all believers in Christ) says to him, "Do not weep. See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals." John turns to see the Lion, a

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traditional symbol of military might, but instead sees “a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered.” It is to this peaceful and bloodied being that the four living creatures standing at the throne of God and the twenty-four elders, representing all of Creation and all those of faith, respectively, offer a hymn of praise: “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.”

This unexpected substitution of Lamb for Lion is an important part of John's message. Although he describes the struggle between good and evil in upcoming scenes in violent and militaristic imagery, he makes it clear from the very beginning that the character of the ultimate victor has nothing to do with violence or force of any kind. The Revelator shows himself within his vision to be a typical human as he looks for salvation to come from a recognized figure of might, the Lion of Judah, but instead he beholds the Lamb that was slain, the Suffering Servant, the Crucified One. Unless one keeps this central image in mind, it is easy to fall into the dreadful error of looking for wholesale slaughter and tribulation in the name of God to bring about the realization of God's Kingdom on Earth as one reads Revelation. A great deal of recent popular literature has been based in this error and, sadly, many of our brothers and sisters have been led astray. It is critical to remember that the Triumphant and Risen One still bears the marks of his sacrifice, reminding us that it is by the sign of the Cross that we conquer – not with arms, as the legend of Emperor Constantine would have it, but with the Spirit.

We catch up here with our reading for the morning. Not content with symbolic representatives of all creation in the person of the four living creatures and of all people of faith in the person of the twenty-four elders giving homage to the Lamb, John adds angels in countless numbers. A “myriad,” by the way, is ten thousand, so with good Hebrew hyperbole, John populates the throne room with ten thousands times ten thousands plus thousands times thousands of angels. That's hundreds of millions plus millions, in case you're keeping track. It's sort of like the federal deficit – a hundred million here, a hundred million there, pretty soon you're into real numbers. But I digress...

What's a little more interesting is the background of what all these angels are singing. “Worthy is the Lamb,” is not just a catchphrase that makes for good hymns and choruses. In the world of the Roman Empire when Revelation was composed, “worthy” was a political term. Walter F. Taylor, Jr., Professor of New Testament Studies at Trinity Lutheran Seminary in Columbus, OH, writes, “Just as today the band plays “Hail to the Chief” when the President of the United States enters a large gathering, so in the first centuries the crowds were trained to shout, “Worthy! Worthy! Worthy is the emperor!” when the Roman emperor appeared in public.” In the coded language of apocalypse, John is reminding his readers that it is Jesus, the Lamb who was slain, not Caesar who is finally in charge of the world. It is a good reminder to us, as well. In our world, it is easy to hear messages urging us to give our allegiance to political parties, to teams, to brands, to groups of all kinds. It is especially easy to hear the message that no one is to be granted allegiance over our own desires and what we perceive as what is in our own best interests, the needs of others notwithstanding. But that is not what was taught by John or by Jesus or by the prophets before them. We are called to love God with all our hearts and minds and souls and strength, the One Jesus called Father, and then to love our neighbors as our selves.

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Our allegiance is to our Loving Creator and to the One who loved us enough to be slaughtered on our behalf.

“Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!” It does sound like the sort of thing one might sing to a Caesar, doesn't it? But we should also remember how the Scriptures apply some of these categories to the Christ. In John's account of Jesus' trial before Pilate, Jesus explains to the Roman governor that his kingdom is not of this world – he and his followers will not wield the sort of power that Pilate understands. As to the wealth of the Lamb, Paul reminds the Corinthians in his second letter that Jesus' approach to wealth is rather different to that of the rest of the world – it is spiritual: “For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.” Paul had earlier written to that same church about the wisdom of Christ in a passage to which I refer often: “For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.” Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength... God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong.” Attributes that we humans might find impressive are turned upside-down in John's vision of Heaven. The way of the Cross and of the Lamb is not the same as the way of the broken world.

To the voices of the countless heavenly host, John adds, “every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, singing, “To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!”” It is a reminder that the Earth is the Lord's and all the fullness thereof. All of creation joins together in praise of God and of Christ. Every bird that flies, every fish that swims, every animal and insect and microbe that inhabits the land, from the polar ice to the desert sands, lifts its voice and being in praise to the One who Created and the One who Redeems. Too often, the portion of humankind who have accepted the Lordship of Jesus over their lives have forgotten that the promise of redemption is made to all of Creation. In another beloved passage from Paul, this one from the Epistle to the Romans, we read, “I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.” The One who created the heavens and the Earth and all that is within them and called them “good” and even “very good” still has a plan for Creation and it does not involve abandonment and destruction but renewal and redemption.

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These images – that of all God's creatures singing praise to God and to the Lamb, whose wondrous love caused the Lord of bliss to bear the dreadful curse for the sake of all souls and that of all creation groaning as it waits for the redemption – these images should remind us of our collective responsibility to the rest of Creation. The action of God in our lives is incredibly personal and intimate – God knows us each as individuals from the time the spark of life is within us – but we cannot consider ourselves as the sole recipients of God's grace, either as individuals or as a species. This is our Father's world and, as the hymn teaches us, God has trusted us with this world to keep it clean and fair. The witness of Scripture regarding our responsibility in this regard reaches from this last book of the Bible all the way back to the first. In Genesis 2:15, we read, "The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it." That word "keep" in Genesis 2:15 is the same as the word "keep" in Numbers 6:24: "The Lord bless you and keep you," the great Aaronic Blessing. The Hebrew word is *shamar* and means a caring, loving, sustaining keeping. We must remember that we hold the Earth in stewardship, that Creation still belongs to the Creator and that we are responsible to God for how we keep it, for the Earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof.

The Earth not only belongs to the Lord, it also gives witness to the Lord. In the creative work of God, we see God's glory. The Catholic scholar, Thomas Berry writes that when we destroy the life of the Good Earth, we also destroy crucial signposts to Divine presence. "If we have a wonderful sense of the divine, it is because we live amid such awesome magnificence. If we have refinement of emotion and sensitivity, it is because of the delicacy, the fragrance, and the indescribable beauty of soul and music and rhythmic movement in the world about us." Commenting on Berry's work, Walter Wink adds, "Our very gusto for living, the joy that satisfies us and blesses our days, are largely a function of the sheer beauty and abundance of nature. We are already beginning to feel the loss as fewer songbirds greet us with the dawn. When we degrade the environment, we deprive ourselves of the most powerful and constant revelation of the Divine itself. When we diminish nature, we diminish the ecstasy and sheer happiness of dwelling on this solitary and incomparable earth. When we damage this intricate and vulnerable creation, we must reckon with a consequent loss in the thrill of being a creature."

As I considered this passage from Revelation this week and how apt it was for this Sunday before Earth Day with its image of all the life of Creation responding in praise to the life and work of Jesus, I found myself wondering, how would our approach to the Earth and its creatures change if we more truly worshipped the Lamb and the One on the throne? Imitation may be the sincerest form of flattery but it is also an important component of worship. As we worship Jesus, the Lamb of God, we wish more and more to grow more and more like him. We recognize Jesus in the image of the Lamb who was slain because we understand that Jesus lived his life not only in total obedience to God but in the greatest love for his brothers and sisters across humankind and, if we take seriously the idea that the redemption of Jesus was for all Creation, then Jesus lived in the greatest love for the rest of God's Creation as well. Jesus gave the ultimate gift of his life not only for all of us here, not only for all those who now call on his name and those who have done and will do so in the future, but also for the birds and animals and trees and flowers of His Father's world. Are we ready to follow him in this? Are we ready, you and I, to consider how our lifestyles, our diets, our habits, impact not only those closest to us, not only humankind around the world, but those same humble beasts and fields that God has given us stewardship

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over? I confess to being challenged in this regard. To live a life marked by simplicity, to minimize my carbon footprint, to go gently through the world, is not something that I have been trained to do over the course of my life. And yet, I hear the call of God to be more aware of how my unthinking actions impact the life of the Creation that God called good.

As we approach Earth Day, we have much to consider as regards our faithful stewardship of this planet. We are blessed to be reminded in this Eastertide that we have been washed clean in the waters of baptism, that we have new life in the Resurrected Christ, that our mistakes of the past and those we will undoubtedly make in the future are erased from any accounting to be made by our loving and merciful God. So we will look to the future as we gather outside to take our traditional picture of the children who are our future on this Earth. Let us take this time as an opportunity also to look to our future as the people of God, gathered in this place weekly to raise our songs of praise to the Lamb who was slain. And let us remember always that we are joined in that praise by the songs of the birds and the croaks of the frogs and the buzz of insects and the sometimes silent, sometimes harmonious, sometimes cacophonous praise of everything that has breath on this Earth, all the Creatures in the beautiful and very good Creation of God. Amen.