

OCTOBER 11, 2020 WORSHIP SERVICE

WELCOME AND PRAYER – PASTOR LOIS

Good morning! We welcome each of you here, back inside the meeting house after our stint of worshipping outdoors. I know there may be some mixed feelings – some have said they had become accustomed to our drive-in services and really enjoyed sitting out, under the trees. And some have expressed eagerness to be back indoors in *this* beautiful worship space. We are fortunate and blessed to have these options! And wherever we are, we are together, God's people, bound together by our common love of God and our longing to worship and follow Jesus faithfully. We also want to be mindful this morning that there are some who are joining us from home by zoom! So, welcome, to everyone!

Since we're back in the building, we wanted to include, again, the **time for sharing announcements** of coming events or opportunities. You may come to the front, here, where the mic is and use some sanitizer if you need to move the mic.

Call to Worship

Leader: Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb

People: Amen! Praise and glory

Leader: wisdom and thanks

People: Honor and power and strength

All: Be to our God forever and ever. Amen!

Invocation – Holy God, we are gathered here this morning to worship and praise you. Quiet our minds and our hearts. Gather us in with your love. Draw us close to you, as you are close to us. Thank you, for your presence here with us. Amen.

Hymn of praise – Although we won't actually sing the hymns since group singing in an indoor space is an activity that studies have found to be particularly dangerous in spreading the virus, but we invite you to hum, if you like. Also, we do invite you to read along with the words and take this opportunity to really let the poetry of the songs sink in to your consciousness as Karen plays. This text references the throne of God, the beautiful city of God, songs of praise abounding and every tear being dried – many of the same references that are made in our Biblical text for this morning. We usually stand for this opening song, so I invite you to stand, if you're comfortable.

Delbert will come, now, to lead in the **Children's Time**.

Morning Prayer –

Loving God, we thank you for the variety of gifts you have given us and for the way you have created each one of us with our own particularities, abilities, strengths, and beauty. Help us to see one another the way you see us. Help us to love the way you love.

Thank you, God, for the opportunity to be worshipping you this morning inside the building, as we recall and appreciate this space and the predictable conditions it offers us. We

thank you also for the work that was accomplished this week – harvesting, teaching, studying, cooking, tending to children, whatever our work has been, we’re grateful for it. We thank you for other successes and accomplishments – successful surgery for Rosi Reimer, for Nicole Hein, for the many weeks of work that culminated in the sale yesterday for Dennis and Norma. God, we know that in nearly situation there is healing along with pain, there is sadness mingled in with joy, there is often some regret about the past alongside of eager anticipation of the future – very few things in life are completely one or the other, but rather a series of complicated experiences and feelings. Thank you for creating us in ways that we can appreciate and balance all sorts of complex things. Thank you for being with us through them, guiding us, healing and comforting us along the way. God, we pray for those who have medical appointments or procedures coming up. Be with them – whatever the needs are. Be with the doctors and nurses and all the front-line folks who are often putting their lives on the line in service to others. Lord, as the coronavirus continues to rage on, continue to be with us in the midst of illness and fear, may your Spirit of compassion and care shine through. As the division and political rhetoric rage on, continue to be with us in the midst of anger and intolerance, may your Spirit of integrity and righteousness prevail.

God, we pray for the family of Oliver Parish as they grieve his loss and celebrate his life. Be with others we know who are grieving the loss of loved ones these days. We pray for those who are suffering the results of hurricanes, fires, wars and climate change. Send your Spirit of Comfort and Love, be present through the lives of your people that your kingdom may come here on earth, as it is in heaven. We pray now the prayer that Jesus taught us – Our Father, who art in heaven...

SHEPHERDED BY A LAMB – PASTOR CALEB

Revelation 7:9-17

If you were a part of our service last week, I preached on chapter 5 of the book of Revelation. Chapter 5 is the chapter many believe is key to understanding the book as a whole.

This is where the Messiah, the Lion of Judah is revealed to be a lamb that was slain. The fact that the lamb was slain is a reference to the crucifixion of Jesus. The passage makes clear that because Jesus was faithful all the way to the cross, he was victorious. He “conquered” as Revelation defines conquering.

I went on to say that this vulnerable yet “conquering” lamb reveals the pattern of how God’s power really works. It’s ultimately the power of sacrificial love.

If you did your homework and read chapters 6 through 11, besides feeling confused, you probably were thinking that God and the lamb seem to be very violent. What was all of this sentimental nonsense about the power of vulnerable love? Apparently, the world just needs lots of death and destruction, and people crying, “save us from the wrath of the lamb!” (6:16).

Well, I didn’t say this was an easy book. I want to take a brief look at the beginning of a series of judgments before moving to the passage that’s our focus for today.

I'll tell a brief story. I always liked bookstores as a kid, and I remember this one time we were at a mall, and I found a book whose author *claimed* to have traveled to hell. I leafed through pages describing pits of differing degrees of severity where people were tortured.

I was very curious to learn more, not at all out of fear but a something more like a junior-high testosterone-fueled fascination. I asked my mom if we could buy the book, and to my disappointment she declined. Something to do with not wanting to scare people into believing.

Not to scare anyone, but let's get a quick tour of chapters 6 through 11, before getting to the question of what to do with this stuff. Remember the scroll with seven seals that only the lamb could open? Each seal is like a separate revelation. Later on, we have seven trumpets and seven bowls of wrath. Seven in these cases symbolizes completion of time, just like seven days complete a week.

These "judgments" have been read many ways, but I begin with an approach that sees these sets of "seven" as a symbolic lens into history from the time of Jesus until the full coming of God's kingdom, each time told a different way.

It's significant that both the seventh seal and the seventh trumpet include "flashes of lightning, rumblings, thunder, and earthquake," just like the Exodus story of Moses receiving the law on Mount Sinai.

The final seal as well as the final trumpet both signal the beginning of the full revealing of God's kingdom. Yet before revealing that beautiful vision, each time John backs up to again describe the drama of struggle with the forces of evil.

In the case of the seals, we start with four different horses, symbolizing the conquest, war, economic exploitation in the form of exorbitant prices, and death that are created by human evil.

Then we hear from martyrs who are killed for their faith in Jesus who cry out for justice, but are told to wait a little longer.

The 6th seal uses some of the same symbolic language of the sun turning black and the moon turning red that we also have in the story of Pentecost in Acts. Yet we know not to quite take that literally when we read the Pentecost story.

Both between the 6th and 7th seal and the 6th and 7th trumpet, John turns to other visions, such as the vision of the multitude of people from every people group worshiping at God's throne that we'll turn to later.

The Seven Trumpets are a whole series of judgments that affect every part of creation and bring great suffering.

Probably the most obvious challenge of reading this stuff is that it seems to be saying God orchestrates all this horrible judgment, death, and destruction on people. How is this a loving God?

There are several responses, and time is too limited to go into a lot of depth.

One is that Revelation isn't naïve. The collective evil of human existence is very real. When God's children oppress and kill each other, a God of love can only be angry as should we.

As Americans we are in kind of a cushy position reading this stuff. Since the Great Depression, we haven't faced much suffering in our white community, at least at the collective level. No, Revelation is not "nice." But neither was the persecution that John the writer was going through, or countless other persecuted Christians throughout history.

Someone who is truly oppressed can be forgiven for having a few desires of vengeance like the martyrs depicted under the 5th seal. US American slaves had a rich end-times imagination, hoping in the day that God would liberate them from slavery and punish their white masters.

God opposes evil and Empire out of God's love and true justice.

A second point of consideration is that the language of Revelation really needs to be read as symbols and not as literal depictions. It may be that the judgments are symbolic ways of saying that human selfishness, evil, and violent, top-down power creates their own destructive consequences.

For one interpreter, this includes "ecological destruction, the arms race, irrational consumerism, the idolatrous logic of the market, and the irrational use of technology and natural resources." There'd be many modern problems we could add to the list.

Evil and runs its course of self-destruction under the sovereignty of God who is really about creating a new heaven and a new earth where we truly flourish in peace in the presence of God.

My last point for this section is that we need to read the whole book in terms of the vulnerability of the lamb that was slain from chapter 5.

The apostle Paul said in 1 Corinthians in 1:25: "This foolish plan of God is wiser than the wisest of human plans, and God's weakness is stronger than the greatest of human strength." We have to read Revelation and the rest of the New Testament closely to try to understand that God's power is different than power as we usually think of it.

It's power born out of weakness, like we see in the cross. As one interpreter puts it, "God power is Lamb power."¹

¹ Gorman, Michael. *Reading Revelation Responsibly*. Cascade Books: Eugene, OR, 2011

We now come to our focus passage from chapter 7: a vision in which suddenly there is a huge multitude people from every tribe, people, language, and nation all worshiping God and the Lamb at the center of the throne.

They are wearing white robes and are waving palm branches, a Jewish symbol of resistance and victory. You'll remember people waved palms at Jesus' triumphal entry. It's another awesome praise scene. John has a conversation with one of the elders about who these people are.

They are the ones who have passed through the great tribulation and have washed their robes in the blood of the lamb. This is another example of symbolic language – because most of us know blood stains are quite the opposite of bleach in regular life.

This either means that these are people who have died for their faith, or they have closely identified with the way of Jesus and have persevered. In the middle of the conflict section of Revelation, we are given a vision into the future goal of God's new creation. Or perhaps we are given a special lens into the present.

The fact that the faithful dipped their robes in the blood of the lamb is a way of saying that the “conquering” Revelation calls us to is never violent. It is never killing others, but rather accepting suffering, and living out costly love.

From this passage of the multitude of people from every corner of the globe, I want to offer several take-aways.

The first of these is to remember that God's victory has already been won through the death and resurrection of Jesus. We don't have to wait for some future showdown between God and the devil, and until then not know who will win.

Jesus is the firstborn from the dead. The pattern of costly love that always plants the seed of resurrection is a pattern that continues to steadily transform and win people. This is the good news of the Gospel. The good news of an upside-down kingdom that is already among us if we have eyes to see.

At the blow of the 7th trumpet we hear the ringing proclamation that *“the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and his Messiah.”* (11:15).

But it is also clear we aren't there yet. God's reign, God's vision of peace, reconciliation, justice, and the breaking down of all barriers that separate us from each other and from a true connection to creation – this hasn't all happened yet.

It remains a vision we have to carry forward for God. In the meantime, the world remains a place of great struggle, as evil and the darker side of our humanity sow their own destruction.

Because we live in the midst of this world in travail, and because the way of Jesus is the way of costly, vulnerable love, joining in on the same pattern will involve some form of suffering.

Sometimes the suffering is internal – our own dying to our own sin, our own part in the mess, which I hope our previous worship series on the deadly sins helped to teach us.

And sometimes the “suffering” – if you want to call it that – comes from the things we willingly give up. It’s the counter-cultural choices we make as folks in the center of the most powerful country on earth, so that we can position ourselves closer to the margins as we identify with the lamb that was slain and with people who are on the margins. Faith in Jesus really is good news. We want to witness to the joy and transformation that this faith brings, without pretending it’s without suffering.

More specifically, in our polarized time, it’s hard and costly to stay connected with those who see the world differently and to be able to talk about that difference. We need this both out of concerns for justice and for counter-productive division in our families and community.

The final point has to do with how we will tell our story as a church, as Alexanderwohl, going through this tumultuous time.

The biggie is of course COVID, the way it has completely interrupted our routines as a congregation, and has raised the question of who we will be when things become a little more normal?

Our relational and mental health is also impacted by an election season with unprecedented polarization that we see playing out even in our own community, uncertainty around the economy, national struggles for racial justice, news of wildfires and hurricanes, and so forth.

Amid this, we need a way to testify to God’s mission progressing even among us. We are still held by God in all of this chaos. The shepherding lamb shows us the way to refreshing springs of the water of life.

The way goes through pain. It goes through identifying with the blood of the lamb. Our congregation has a well-developed sense of its history. You know the blood, sweat, tears, and faith of your spiritual and biological ancestors.

At the same time, with these deep roots, we are open to identifying with the blood, sweat, tears, and faith of people outside of us. This has included people from our community, and more recently the desire to know the stories of people of color and immigrants to our country.

I like how Michael Gorman says it: “The beautiful vision of ‘a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands’ (Rev 7:9) is—or should be—at the heart of the church’s self-understanding. This is what God is up to in the world.”

We long to be a part of the multitude dressed in white that includes people of every tribe, language, and nation. Jesus has been leading us all along and still. None of our challenges are undoing us. We are assured of the victory of God’s love. Let’s embrace that and overcome like the lamb.