

OCTOBER 4, 2020 WORSHIP SERVICE

MORNING PRAYER – LOIS HARDER

In our prayer this morning I will mention a 5-year old girl named Rayah Piland. She is the great-granddaughter of Connie Wiens and the great-niece of Denise Duerksen. She had surgery on Friday to repair a hole in her heart that she has had since birth.

Dear God, we thank you for this beautiful morning. We thank you for each one gathered here to worship you and we thank you for those who are not able to be here this morning. We ask for your presence and blessing on us and on those we love – wherever they may be.

We pray for those who are not here because they are in college or graduate school and live at a distance. Be with our college students; keep them safe and help them to stay focused. We pray for those who are absent this morning because they are elderly and live in a nursing facility and cannot leave because of the virus. We pray also for those who work hard to care for our elders. Grant all of them your Spirit of encouragement and stamina. Help them to know your presence and love for them and help US to remember them with calls, cards and prayers, knowing that your love is often communicated through the actions of your people.

Healing God, we thank you for the ways we can also see your love and care through the work of doctors and other medical providers. We thank you for the healing experienced by Velma Hiebert this week, for healing that Matt Voth and Darla Banman have both had, for strength and healing that Lee Suderman has experienced, for successful surgery for Rayah to repair the hole in her heart. We ask for continued healing for each of them and for many more. We pray for the athletes here in Goessel who are dealing with various injuries, and for others in our families or community who come to our minds in need of healing for their bodies, minds or spirits.

Lord, we pray for the tens of thousands of people in our nation and around the world whose lives have been upended by illness or death caused by covid. We pray for the president and his family and for all who are sick with this virus. May people everywhere show compassion and care for one another as we live through this pandemic.

We pray for those in California and other places in the pacific northwest where the wildfires are still burning. We pray for those in other parts of the world where the warming of the earth is causing serious damage to humans and all creation. May your earth be tended and cared for.

In this polarized and divided time that we're living in, may we who claim to follow Jesus live out his sacrificial love in ways that show your surprising and upside down kingdom, God. We pray in the name of Jesus, the Lamb. Amen.

“THE LAMB THAT WAS SLAUGHTERED” – CALEB YODER
Revelation 5

*“Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain,
to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength
and honor and glory and praise!”*

Revelation has to be one of the richest sources of beautiful words of praise, much of which has been set to music. We have scenes of worship with beautiful liturgy, as well as disturbing images of violence, as we get farther into the book.

This is our third Sunday into a series on Revelation. It has been confusing and controversial throughout church history. Maybe you were trying to visualize a lamb with seven horns and seven eyes – how would that actually be arranged on the animal’s head? Do I really want to meet Jesus someday, if that’s what he’s turned into?

If you read chapter 4, you read about the four living creatures, one like a lion, one like an ox, one like an eagle, and one like a man, each with six wings covered with eyes, flying around the throne of God. Try visualizing that, much less drawing them!

At least Revelation simplifies things somewhat compared to the book of Ezekiel; in Ezekiel, there are likewise four living creatures, but each one has four heads.

Revelation is full of symbols and imaginative description that we can’t take literally. Yet I encourage us to stay with this book, to find out what the Spirit might be saying to the church today through it.

A couple weeks ago, I mentioned that we will engage this book not as a complicated code to figure out the future, but as a lens to learn to view our reality from God’s perspective.

Revelation is part of a genre or type of literature called apocalyptic literature. You can find examples of apocalyptic writing in Ezekiel and Daniel in the Old Testament, as well as writing outside the Bible. This literature is highly symbolic and aims to give a window into God’s perspective on what is happening on earth.

John, the author of Revelation, seems to draw freely from images and symbols of the Old Testament, but he doesn’t always do exactly what you would expect. That’s where you have to pay attention!

Sometimes, if you learn to know a new musical group, you can find a description that compares their style to other groups or musical genres. You can trace a whole story of who influenced who. Yet, it is normal for a band or an artist to find their own unique style, that might be a combination of influences, yielding something new.

This is what is happening with Revelation – John regularly adapts or reworks the symbols and images he takes from elsewhere, infusing them with new meaning.

In particular, I want us to pay attention to what it means to “conquer” in Revelation.

After John addresses each of the seven churches, Revelation chapter 4 shifts to a vision of the throne room of God. That’s where we meet the four living creatures and twenty-four elders, and hear the words of praise that we began our service with today.

It seems all good, but when we reach chapter 5, there’s a problem. There’s this scroll with seven seals (so many sevens!), and no one in all creation is able to open it.

In prophetic writings, a scroll sometimes symbolized the prophetic word, sealed so that only the authorized person could read it. As we read on in chapters 6-8, the scroll seems to have to do with God’s purposes being fulfilled in human history.

The question “Who is worthy to open the seals?” asks “who is the true actor that moves human history forward toward God’s kingdom?”

At this moment of the vision, John becomes emotionally flooded, and begins to just weep. But one of the elders assures him that there is Someone. It’s the “lion of the tribe of Judah.” This lion is worthy to open the seals of the scroll.

In C.S. Lewis’ *Chronicles of Narnia*, Jesus is depicted as a lion named Aslan. Aslan was a good lion, but not tame or safe. We saw a lion at the zoo recently. He was resting and calm, but I was still glad for strong glass separating him from us.

A lion is a pretty sensible image for a great deliverer or Messiah who will save God’s people and establish God’s reign. In our country, we often dream about the coming of a great President who will just clean up the mess that’s in Washington and usher in glory days. A lion fits with that thought. So, what a shock, when John turns and sees a “Lamb standing as if slaughtered.”

What is the meaning of Lamb? Is it just me, or is it really odd to expect a ferocious lion, and then see a slaughtered lamb? There’s a story told about how my grandparents convinced my dad to stop using a bottle when he was a toddler.

When they had lambs, they would keep any lamb that was sickly in the basement in order to bottle-feed it. Well, as my dad was getting old enough to be completely weaned off of a bottle, they had the perfect strategy. They told him they needed his bottle for the lamb. And my dad willingly gave it up.

A story like this illustrates how a lamb can be not only tender, but very vulnerable – vulnerable enough to need to be bottle-fed. How can a lion be revealed to be a lamb?

John says that this slaughtered lamb has already “conquered,” and now seems pretty powerful and out of character with a gentle little lamb. My mind first went to the Exodus story where the Israelites put blood of the Passover lamb on their doorposts before escaping Egypt.

While the Gospels connect Jesus' cross to the Passover story, that's probably not what John of Revelation has in mind. From a study by one of my former professors, I learned that the word John uses for "lamb," is never connected to ritual sacrifice, but instead connotes the vulnerability of a young sheep. "Slaughter" is also not the language of ritual sacrifice, but of hot-headed murder, as when Cain killed Abel.¹

That makes it all the more shocking for our ferocious Savior lion to turn out to be a slaughtered lamb. John is clearly pushing his symbols almost to the point of absurdity to make a point about how true victory is won.

Most of you are probably familiar with the clothing and shoe brand *Nike*, with its iconic swoosh. "Nike" is the Greek word for victory or "conquering," and it's precisely the verb form of this word that is repeated numerous times through Revelation.

It's normally the word to describe what kings and generals do when they win battles of war and amass wealth and control territory. This exact word is said of the Lamb who "has conquered," yet John is talking about the cross and resurrection of Jesus.

In the letters to the seven churches, John's vision repeatedly promises reward, "to everyone who conquers..." and pointedly in verse 3:21, Jesus promises, "To the one who conquers I will give a place with me on my throne, just as I myself conquered." (Rev 3:21 NRS)

Let's learn what John really means by this code language of "conquering." This is an enigmatic book, but I will make the case that the "conquering" that John presents is non-violent, but gutsy faithfulness that accepts suffering if need be. It is the language of warfare turned on its head.

This kind of faithfulness isn't pie-in-the sky, sentimental, escapist, or naïve. We truly are in a real struggle, but our weapons are not those of violence.

This is who we are (at our best) as Anabaptist Christians, and a truth and conviction that has always been a part of the Anabaptist stream of Christian faith, whether or not we have actually practiced it.

After the Lamb comes on the scene in chapter 5, the vision declares that the Lamb has made people from "every tribe, language, and people" into a "kingdom" and "priests." There's no question that there's political undertones here. The Romans demanded worship of the emperor, and John ain't having it.

If followers of Jesus are to be a kind of "kingdom," then the church living out its calling is a political matter. I'm not talking about partisan politics. If Christians just focus on getting the "right people" elected, the right leader to exercise top-down authoritarian power, then we are misunderstanding completely what John means by "conquer" or by the scroll with seven seals. Then we are simply believing in exercise of power in the traditional sense, and not the kind of

¹ Johns, Loren. *The Lamb Christology of the Apocalypse of John*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2003.

power at work in Jesus, and countless others who have lived at the margins of empires and institutions of power, embracing simplicity, poverty, and nonviolence, and forswearing personal gain.

It's not wrong to seek to influence our elected officials toward something closer to the values that Jesus preached, or to join movements for social change on behalf of those who are marginalized or oppressed. But goal is not winning a culture war, or winning control of political structures, as much as faithfulness to Jesus' way.

Our Anabaptist stream of Christian faith emphasizes forming communities of mutually accountable followers of Jesus who together read the scripture and live out this kingdom vision. That act alone has a real influence on the world.

The message of Revelation might be to challenge our ideas of who is the real actor of history. Who propels history forward? It's not Presidents and Kings who are the real, movers and shakers of history. They aren't God's primary agents. In an ugly and chaotic election, we need that truth.

"But Pastor Caleb, this could get violent!" Maybe so, but who's on the throne through all of this? Let's breath a bit easier. It's the lamb who was slaughtered who moves history forward, who has the power to open the seals of the scroll. It is every instance of truly self-giving love in the Spirit of Jesus that together move history forward.

Christians have lived in a variety of empires and states, starting with the Roman Empire. Some better than others. Some societies or states that have come closer to governing for the well-being of all, and others that have been corrupt, dysfunctional, or oppressive. Christians have lived and suffered persecution under oppressive states, as well as lived in relatively good states. Even this congregation can trace its history through four different states: the Netherlands, Prussia, Russia, and the United States.

Our faith is so much bigger than who the powers-that-be are, because God is so much bigger.

I think of the example of the Meseretes Kristus Church in Ethiopia. It is part of the Mennonite World Conference, and grew tremendously during a period of Communist rule when the church had to be underground. Who was in power made it challenging for the church, but it didn't stop the church from being true to its mission. It is a significant thing in these conflictual and polarized times for us to simply be the church.

In this election season, remember who is really on the throne, and *how* it is that God's purposes are really advanced in human history. Not through top-down authoritarian power structures predicated on threat of violence. Rather, true "conquering" is just as much of a battle, but it is won through the self-giving love that Jesus practiced. This is the real pattern of God's kingdom.

“Conquering” through love is costly. In chaotic times, we don’t have a guarantee of escaping some form of suffering. In fact, our Christian discipleship calls us to a willingness to suffer if that’s what it takes to be in solidarity with others that are equally loved by God.

The guarantee we do have is that God is with us. God transforms and redeems the struggle. Verse 9 says that the Lamb has purchased or ransomed by his blood people from every “tribe, and language, and people, and nation.”

This true “conquering,” the true pattern of God’s redemptive work creates a new kingdom of people all across the world, crossing political and social boundaries that join the struggle against evil, following Jesus by “conquering” as Jesus “conquered.”

How fitting that today we’ve found a way to celebrate World Communion Sunday safely, partaking in the bread and the cup of Christ with brothers and sisters around the world.

Remember that the practice of communion is more than eating together, though that is part of it. This practice would never have come to be without the cross of Christ. We may want to hold a more pleasant thought than a death on a cross, and yet our faith and this practice sit on the foundation of Jesus’ death and resurrection. We wouldn’t be here without that.

When we practice communion, we are connected to believers in Jesus everywhere, some in incredibly difficult circumstances. We also willingly enlist ourselves in God’s struggle for a new creation by committing ourselves to the same pattern of self-giving love by which Jesus “conquered.”

So don’t take communion if you’re not up for that! Our Lamb has conquered. Let us follow him.