

December 5, 1999  
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## A CHRISTMAS MESSAGE FOR A NEW MILLENNIUM: *HOPELESSNESS*

*Revelation 5:1-4*

As you know, we have chosen to work our way through the Book of the Revelation as we count down the last few weeks of this millennium. Since Revelation has so much to say about end times, it makes perfect sense. But what about now? Advent? What does Revelation have to do with the story of Advent...with the anticipation of the coming of the Christ child on Christmas Eve?

Actually, more than you might imagine. In fact, Revelation 4 and 5 set us up perfectly for the Christmas event. Think back with me for a moment to Pastor Stuart's text last week. He preached on Revelation 4: The glorious and overwhelming glimpse of the throne room of God in heaven. Even if you weren't here, I'm sure you are familiar with the text. Every time we sing "Holy, Holy, Holy," we are quoting from Revelation 4. A door opens and we find ourselves in the heavenly throne room. Someone is seated on the throne but we can't make him out. But, oh, the activity that is taking place around him. Brilliant light of rainbow colors emanates from the throne. Twenty-four elders dressed in white worship God as thunder and lightning crash around them. Four unusual animals that look like a lion, ox, man and eagle...all with wings and eyes covering their body... cry out to the rest of the assembly, declaring the holiness of God. And every time they speak those words, the elders fall down in praise of the one who sits on the throne declaring, "You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things and by your will they were created and have their being."

Do you find it all a bit overwhelming? We should. John is introducing us to one of the critical themes of scripture: The utter holiness of God. Our God in heaven, our Heavenly Father, is so good, so pure, so just, so holy, that an entire heavenly choir has been assembled for all of creation just to sing his praises.

Every time we come into a worship service--every time we sit or kneel to pray to God--we are offering prayers to the Holy One--the pure, righteous, Holy One. The only one who is worthy of the word "Awesome." The story of Christmas begins with the holiness of God. An utterly perfect, utterly flawless, utterly holy God.

This morning, we are drawn up short.

Our family spent Thanksgiving in Salt Lake City with Cyndi's family. We have never done that before. The day after Thanksgiving is the day when all of the lights and Christmas decorations are revealed downtown. So, for our last night in Salt Lake, we went downtown, had dinner and walked into the center of town for the Christmas festivities. One of the highlights is the unveiling of the window decorations at the department store called ZCMI. Every window, and I lost count of how many windows there were, is exquisitely decorated. Inside are images of Christmas, beautiful and expensive gifts, all of it presented in a breathtakingly beautiful way.

Even though we got downtown early, the place was packed. The lines to look into the windows were huge. You know me and lines. No way were we going to stand in line to look at windows, no matter how beautiful they might be. But I did stand on the other side of the street, looking at the mass of teeming humanity, wondering what was going through the minds of the children being ushered along by their parents from window to window. I wonder how many tears were shed because a young child decided that they wanted whatever beautiful thing lay on the other side of the glass. And they couldn't have it. No matter how much they wept, those beautiful presents were out of their reach and there wasn't anything they could do about it.

This is exactly the image we have from our text this morning. John has seen a glimpse of glory. A fantastic throne room filled with colors and lights and strange creatures the likes of which he has never seen before. And as he looks closer, he realizes the person sitting on the throne is holding something. It is a scroll. It is a scroll sealed with seven seals. And somehow John knows that inside this scroll is a glimpse into God's plan for the world.

This is God's message for all of humankind...right there, resting in his hand, waiting to be read. All that needs be done is break those seals, unroll the scroll, and God's purpose will be discovered. It is right there for the taking.

An angel calls out asking who will open the scroll. John looks around expectantly, eager to see who will reveal God's plan for the world. But no one answers the call. No one is worthy to open the scroll. And John breaks down. The text says that he wept and wept, unconsolable at the hopelessness of not being able to hear the rest of what God had to say.

You cannot understand the happiness of Christmas unless you understand the hopelessness that precedes Christmas. We all want to jump to the announcement of the angels to the shepherds. Good news! Great joy! A child is born. He is Immanuel, God with us. But before that moment of good news lay centuries of hopelessness. Centuries of silence from God. Centuries of people waiting to hear something, anything, from the glorious God of creation. But there was no one who could bring the news. No one to open the scroll.

Do you see that? People had had glimpses of God. They'd caught a glimpse of him in the glory of creation. Beautiful Mt. Rainier. Glorious Puget Sound. Towering fir trees. They had caught a glimpse of him in the message of the prophets. Abraham. Moses. Perhaps even more powerfully, they had caught a glimpse of God in the testimony of their own hearts. Deep inside, they knew there HAD to be something more, there just HAD to be something more behind all of this.

John is absolutely heartbroken because no one can be found who is worthy to read the scroll. He wants to know what is in God's hands. He wants to know about God's future. He has had a glimpse of God, a taste of God's glory, and he wants more. And he is so close. There's the scroll. Written on inside and outside. Covered with the story of God's plan for the world. And there's no one to read it. And he weeps in despair.

I think there are two wonderful things to draw from this story this morning. First is John's wonderful, desperate hunger to know more of God. John despaired because, having seen this

vision of God, he wanted to know more. He wanted to see more. And it appeared that he would not because no one was found who could unroll the scroll and read it. John was desperate to know more about God.

What if we were as passionate to know more of God! Frankly, we are rather blasé about the whole thing, even at Christmas time. We love the decorations, we love the presents, we love the celebrations and parties, we love the music, we love the worship services. But having experienced all of these, it is enough. We have our fill. We are ready to move on to a new year full of other STUFF.

But wouldn't it be something if one year, maybe this year, the wonder of the whole thing really broke through and grabbed our souls? Wouldn't it be something if we were sailing along through the four weeks of Advent and, suddenly, WHAM, we caught a glimpse of the holiness of God - We caught a vision of the glory of the angels. And we found our souls crying out, "More, more...I want to see more. I want to know more of this God. I want to hear what else he has to say to me."

John was moved to tears because he wanted to know all that God had for him to know...and he thought he might be left out. Wouldn't it be something if we found ourselves moved to the point of tears to know more of this glorious God of Christmas? Do not be satisfied with the trappings and tinsel of Christmas this year. Seek more. Weep for more. Desperately desire more from God.

There is something else. Perhaps we need to learn to live in the tension of unknowing. There are lots of times in life when the scroll is rolled up and we just don't know what is coming next. God knows, but for some reason, he's not telling.

Nana Peggy, Cyndi's mom, has a wonderful Christmas tradition for our children. She wraps 24 little packages, 12 for Cooper and 12 for Rachel. Each day of December leading up to Christmas Eve, they take turns opening one of their little packages. This is the first year that Cooper has really gotten into the whole present thing...and it is killing him. The other day I was sitting at the dinner table and Cooper brought every one of his presents over to

the table, one at a time, and asked me if that was his present and if he could open it. Yes, that was his present. No, he couldn't open it yet. He has tried more ways than you can imagine to talk us into opening his presents ahead of time.

Cooper is just going to have to live without knowing for a while. And so do we. We have to live with the tension of unknowing. You've had a medical test and you're waiting for the results. A week seems like forever. You're single and you'd like to be married and you're wondering if God forgot you when he was handing out spouses. Things are not going well with your kid. You love him but he is making some bad choices and you are desperate to know if things are going to be okay with him. You are trying to make college plans, but you haven't discovered God's will.

There are so many times when we want to rip open the scroll and take a peek. Just a peek at what lies ahead. But God says, "No." You are just going to have to make do with what I've shown you. The rest will come in time.

We all wonder what the scroll says. We all wonder what the future holds, what OUR future holds, what the new millennium holds. Well, we don't know what the future holds. But we know who holds the future. There it is, in his hand. To be revealed at the right time in the right way. In the mean time, we wait and trust.

Frankly, it gives special meaning to the words of communion. We always hear these words near the end of the communion service: "For as often as you eat this bread and drink this juice, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes."

#### SERMON DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

#### HOPELESSNESS

Revelation 5:1-4

Pastor Mark Toone

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- *How does chapter four prepare us for the first verses of chapter 5? Why is John's response so emotional? In what way is a spirit of hopelessness cultivated?*
- *What part does hopelessness play in the Christmas story? How did it prepare us for the good news when it finally arrived?*
- *Pastor Mark talked about the "tension of unknowing." What did he mean by that? What have you found to be the best way to deal with times of unknowing? How has God used those times to shape your spirit?*
- *Please pray for those who are experiencing hopelessness this Christmas season. Pray that the body of Christ might minister to them. Pray that the Spirit of Christ might bring them comfort.*