

12 December, 1999
Chapel Hill Presbyterian Church
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A CHRISTMAS MESSAGE FOR A NEW MILLENNIUM:
HEALING
Revelation 5:1-10

The book of Revelation may at first seem a strange text for an Advent series. But in fact it is a perfect preparation for our celebration of the coming of the God-child. Chapter four gives us an unprecedented glimpse of a **holy** God. The One who sits upon the throne in John's vision is the Eternal One, the creator of all things. From the beginning of time, creatures of every sort have surrounded his throne to sing praises to the **Holiness** of God.

John watches in amazement. And he notices that the One on the throne has something in his hand--A scroll sealed with seven seals. In it is contained the unfolding of God's great plan for all of humanity. Here, in God's hand, is the rest of the story. John is desperate to discover what is written on that scroll. As with every human, he is asking the question, "What is next? Who am I? What does the future hold for me?" But here he comes face to face with the great human dilemma. A sinful human is not worthy to delve into the mysteries of God. An angel calls asking who will come forward, break the seals and reveal God's future plans. But no one answers. Only deafening silence. And John breaks into tears of **hopelessness**. A Holy God. Hopeless humanity. What will happen next. (Read)

"Stop crying!" says one of the twenty-four elders. For all of his created life, this elder had one job. Every time the four creatures in front of the throne sang the praises of God, this unnamed elder, along with the other 23, would fall on his face before the Holy one and offer him this praise: "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."

But for the first time in his existence, the elder stops what he is doing. In an act of heavenly compassion, he turns to this mortal who is weeping uncontrollably and says, "Do not cry! I know you

are despairing because you don't think anyone can open the scroll. But there is one who is worthy. He is the Lion of Judah, the Root of David. He has triumphed. HE is able to open the scroll and its seven seals."

This would be the kind of language that would have dried the tears of any first century Jew. You see, this was Messiah talk. The lion is the most mentioned animal in the Bible. But there is one particular verse that would have sprung forth from John's recollection. In Genesis 49 when Jacob is blessing his twelve sons, he speaks these words about Judah: "You are a lion's cub, O Judah; ...he crouches and lies down, like a lioness...who dares to rouse him? The scepter will not depart from Judah nor the ruler's staff from between his feet until he comes to whom it belongs and the obedience of the nations is his." "Lion of Judah!!" That was powerful Messiah talk.

So was "Root of David." Jesse was the father of King David and it was the prophet Isaiah who predicted that a shoot would grow up from the stump of Jesse who would be full of the Spirit of the Lord. He would judge the world with righteousness and justice. He would strike the earth and slay the wicked. He would be a banner for the people and all the nations would rally around him.

Surely this fearsome Lion of Judah is worthy, says the elder. He can take the scroll. He can break the seals. He can reveal the completion of human history. Can't you see John drying his tears? He gazes around with excitement, eager to catch a glimpse of this awesome Lion of Judah. Where is he? Where is he?

And it is here in verse 6 that we have what one theologian describes as the most wrenching changes in imagery that you will find in all of scripture. John is looking expectantly for the Lion of Judah. And suddenly, what does he see? Verse 6: "Then I saw a Lamb...." He was expecting a lion. It was a lamb that showed up. And not even an adult sheep. The word that is used here is specifically small. It might be translated "little lamb." It is enough of a contrast to expect a lion and see a sheep. But he expects a lion and sees a little lamb. Amazing.

But that's not all of it. What is the condition of the lamb? Listen again: "Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain..." Actually, the better word is slaughtered. Do you know how a

lamb was slaughtered for sacrifice? A sharp knife was run across its neck, severing the jugular so that the blood would pour from the wound.

One of my most memorable sites in Israel is Mt. Tabor. Some traditions hold this to be the Mt. of Transfiguration. It is a long climb to reach the top but when you do, a beautiful church awaits you. I took a group up there once. We went to the chancel area of the church and sat down to worship. Above us was a domed ceiling covered with the most beautiful of mosaics. And in the midst of these gorgeous works of tile art was the image that is still seared into my brain. It was a beautiful, stark white lamb standing, staring down at the worshipper. And its neck was sliced from ear to ear. Crimson tiles cascaded down the snow-white front of this sacrificial lamb...and he just stood there.

It is this text that inspired that mosaic. The scriptures are packed with images of the sacrificial lamb. Remember Passover? It was the blood of a spotless lamb that was to be brushed on the door posts and lintels of every house in Egypt. Otherwise, the angel of death would visit them and destroy every firstborn son, human and animal alike.

In Isaiah 53, the image of a sacrificial lamb is presented poignantly: "He was oppressed and afflicted yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth...he poured out his life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors. For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors."

It is John in his gospel who brings this lamb image to the New Testament. Do you remember the words of John the Baptist as Jesus appeared at his baptismal waters? "Behold the lamb who takes away the sins of the world."

We do not know why it is so but from the beginning of God's relationship with his human creation, he decreed that it was only the blood of a spotless, perfect sacrificial lamb that could make atonement for sin. Let us never forget as we celebrate Christmas, that this was a baby born to die. His purpose in coming was to become the perfect sacrifice for the sins of humanity, paying the price that we could never pay ourselves.

On our last trip to Israel we ate dinner one night in a Bedouin tent out in a field near a town called Beth Sahour. Beth Seth Sahour is just outside of Bethlehem. It is also known as Shepherd's Fields. You heard the reading earlier today. It was near this sight where we ate that the angels appeared 2000 years ago to trumpet the good news of the birth of Messiah. When we looked up into the cloudless evening sky, we were looking at the stage upon which was presented the most glorious spectacle anyone on earth had ever seen.

This you already know. But do you know why those shepherds kept their flocks there? The sheep that were grazed in Beth Sahour were the sheep used in the Temple sacrifices. These sheep were raised for the purpose of being slaughtered in sacrifice to God. When the shepherd's rushed to Bethlehem to see this baby that had been born, little did they know that they were staring into the eyes of the one who would put them out of business. For there, lying in a manger, was God's perfect, permanent Passover lamb.

This scene in chapter 5 is the central theme of the entire book of Revelation. In fact, chapters 4 and 5 are the core around which the rest of the book is built. But I will go farther than that. This may be the most powerful image of the truth that is at the heart of the entire New Testament! What is that truth? Victory through sacrifice. What were the Jews expecting? A Messiah. A Lion of Judah who would tear the heads off of their enemies. Who appeared? A Lamb. The Lamb of God. This Lamb taught that when you are struck on the cheek, you will be victorious, not when you strike back, but when you offer the other cheek to be struck. This Lamb taught that if someone steals your coat from you, you should offer your cloak as well. This Lamb said that the meek shall inherit the earth and that the peacemakers would be blessed and that the poor in spirit would see God. And ultimately, this Lamb allowed himself to be arrested, tortured and nailed to a wooden cross where his lifeblood dripped slowly from nail pierced wounds. It was a spear thrust from a soldier that spilled the last of that precious blood that remained within that great heart.

It was the most unexpected, most unreasonable, most counter-intuitive scheme ever devised. If we had been God, we never

would have done it this way. But we were not. And He did. The eternal Son of God...the Lion of Judah...became the Lamb of God and purchased our redemption. As St. Augustine put it: "Proud man would have died had not a lowly God found him."

Here we discover the solution to our great dilemma. We look upon a holy God and, like John, we are hopeless. How can a God who is perfect put up with me in my complete imperfection? What can I possibly do? The cry comes from heaven, "You can do nothing. But I have done it all. Behold, the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world." And we find our healing.

Here is the Christmas story in a nutshell: Mary had a little lamb. He was slaughtered to save you and me. "God made him to be sin who had no sin so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

There is more to be said about this text. We shall--we must--return to it next week for our Christmas Sunday story. But let us take at least this one thing from it this morning.

The suffering soul can never say, "Where is God? God does not understand my pain. He does not know what I am going through." Our God knows EXACTLY what you are going through. He understands anxiety and despair. He understands humiliation. He understands rejection and betrayal. He understands physical torment. He understands the fear of death. He understands the pain of losing a child. Because our God, the Lion of Judah, became the sacrificial lamb.

I know a handful of your stories. Some of you are in torment this week. A mom backs over her three-year-old with her car. He may be paralyzed. Can God understand the torment she is facing? The answer is yes. A man faces debilitating depression and a sense of absolute utter worthlessness. Can God understand the torment he is facing? The answer is yes. The Lamb of God suffered as no one has ever suffered before. And through that suffering came to victory. Why do the heavenly singers declare him worthy to break the seals and open the scroll? Because he is the conquering Lion of Judah? Because he is the Root of David? No. Because the Lion of Judah became the Lamb of God and purchased salvation for the world.

Whatever your suffering, the Lamb of God can lead you through it to victory.

SERMON DISCUSSION QUESTIONS
OUR HEALING
Revelation 5: 1-10

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- *Read the text. We are not told specifically what is on the scroll. What do YOU think might be on it. Why does John weep because no one is found to open it?*
- *The elder tells John he need not cry. Why? What is his promise? In what surprising way is that promise fulfilled?*
- *Describe carefully all the features of the lamb that appears. (We will deal with these in greater detail next Sunday.) What unusual features does the lamb have on him? What do you think they represent? Where does the lamb stand? What is the significance of that? Notice the new song (why a new one?). What is powerfully significant about the singing of this song to the lamb?*
- *We are introduced in this text to one who brings healing through victorious suffering. Is there any suffering among your life? Share with each other and offer prayers that God might lead them victoriously through this experience.*