

Pastor Mark Toone
December 19, 1999
Chapel Hill Presbyterian Church

**A CHRISTMAS MESSAGE FOR A NEW
MILLENNIUM
HALLELUJAH!
*Revelation 5:1-14***

For Advent we have chosen to live in chapters 4 and 5 of Revelation. It has prepared us marvelously for this moment...this last Christmas Sunday of the millennium. In these two chapters we have rediscovered the **holiness** of God. John is granted a peek into heaven and he sees who he assumes to be God, seated on a throne, surrounded by his creation, all of whom are singing praises to his greatness. In God's hand is a scroll. The scroll represents the unfolding of human history. John is anxious to discover "the rest of the story"...to delve into the mysteries of God's plan for humanity. But he discovers, to his consternation, that there is no one who is worthy to take the scroll from God's hand, break the seals and read what is contained within. Here we discover the second aspect of preparation for Christmas: **Hopelessness**. The moment humankind begins to recognize God in his holy glory, we are suddenly stricken with a consuming sense of hopelessness because of our own sinful state.

Last week we watched John as he wept uncontrollably at the thought of no one opening the scroll. He is silenced by one of the elders. This one who had been created for the perpetual worship of God pauses in what he is doing and tells John to stop crying because there is one who is worthy to open the scroll. It is the Lion of Judah. In eagerness, John dries his eyes and looks around to see this powerful, conquering Messianic figure. What he sees, instead, is a Lamb of God who had been slain, yet is standing. Here we spoke of our healing. How God, who required a blood sacrifice for the atonement of sin, offered the perfect blood sacrifice in his own son. We are **healed** because the Lion of Judah became the Lamb of God.

This morning...this Christmas Sunday morning...we look at the last of our themes: **Hallelujah!** When the Lamb of God steps forward to take the scroll, **all hallelujah breaks loose!** Listen to the whole reading one more time.

We left a few things unexplained last Sunday. Let's pick up where we left off. Besides the fact that he has blood streaming down his breast, what else do you notice about the appearance of the lamb? Seven horns and seven eyes! That's reasonably odd, wouldn't you say? Remember, this is apocalyptic literature. Filled with imagery. It is like cartoon, MTV and holy scripture all wrapped up into one experience. So what does this mean?

Revelation is filled with numbers. One that is often used is seven. Every time you read the number seven, you should understand that to mean "completeness." In Jewish tradition, the horn represented power. In Deuteronomy 33, when Moses was blessing the twelve tribes, he spoke of Joseph like this: "In majesty he is like a firstborn bull; his horns are the horns of a wild ox. With them he will gore the nations, even those at the ends of the earth." In Daniel's great vision in chapter 7, the most horrible beast of which he dreamt was a terrifying beast with ten horns. Horns mean power. So, what would seven horns mean? Unlimited power. Irresistible might. Here's more irony. The simple, humble sacrificial lamb is, in fact, perfectly, irresistibly powerful.

What about the seven eyes? Again, seven means perfect. And eyes represent wisdom. Do you remember the four creatures around the throne of God? They are covered with eyes? These who spend their lives worshipping God also see and understand everything. So, too, the Lamb of God. He is perfectly wise.

What a combination! Perfect power. Perfect wisdom. The more we explore this vision, the more we discover that the initial impression of a helpless, slain lamb is the furthest thing from truth. The more we look, the more we realize that this Lamb of God is formidable indeed.

But there is more. When John turns to look for the Lion, where does he discover the Lamb to be? Did you notice? Verse 6: "Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing in the center of the throne...." Notice, it doesn't just say he was standing in the center of all the creatures, although it does go on to say that. It says he was standing in the center of the throne! Who was seated on the throne in the first place? God! And has God moved? No. Because in verse 7 the Lamb takes the scroll from the right hand of him who sat on the throne. Somehow, in this dizzying image, we must try to imagine that, at the same

time, God and the Lamb of God both occupy the great throne of heaven.

Remember, this is picture! This is sacred cartoon. It is trying to make a point. What is the first great point being made in this text? The **absolute centrality of Jesus**. It is Jesus, the Lamb of God, who has saved humanity through the purchase of his blood. It is Jesus, the Lamb of God, who is worthy to take the scroll. It is Jesus, the Lamb of God who is discovered somehow standing in the center of the throne, even as God the Father still occupies it. It is Jesus, the Lamb, who somehow springs forth from the very center of the being of God. While every other heavenly creature is sprawled on its face before the throne, it is Jesus, the Lamb of God, who dares to reach out and take the scroll from the hand of God. It is Jesus who is perfectly powerful, Jesus who is perfectly wise.

But there's more! What happens to the worship that is taking place as soon as the Lamb takes the scroll? Did you notice? The worship changes its focus. Up until now, it was God enthroned who was the recipient of the worship of the four creatures and the twenty-four elders. Now, the spotlight swings. The moment the Lamb takes the scroll, what happens? V. 8: "And when he had taken it, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down **before the Lamb!**"

Here we discover the second great theme of this text: **Celebration!** First, it was the Centrality of Jesus. Now it is heavenly Celebration. This celebration is fascinating and inspiring for several reasons. First, as I said, because the attention of the worship shifts from God to the Lamb. Imagine that! Who would dare to receive worship in the presence of God on his throne! But the Lamb does. Not only that, it is a new song. Did you notice? They compose a brand new song to sing in praise of the worthy lamb. And of course they must. No one has ever done what the Lamb has accomplished. It was he who left heaven and sacrificed himself to purchase humankind for God. Every tribe, every language, every people, every nation. He not only set them free with his blood, he transformed them into royalty. Kings and priests to serve God and reign with Him. Who but the Lamb has done such things? Of course a new song must be written. None would be adequate.

Notice one more thing about the Celebration. Notice how it broadens. Who is worshipping in verse 8? The four living creatures and the twenty-four elders. Then, suddenly, in verse 11, a new chorus of voices is heard. Do you remember? "Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders."

Can you imagine the glory of it! We who were at the Lighthouse School Christmas concert got a taste of it last Tuesday. They just kept coming, row after row after row of beautiful angels. My how they sang. And there were about 200 of them. Now, try heavenly angels. Try thousands upon thousands upon thousands, all in a circle, all turned inward, all singing the same song in praise to the Lamb as the creatures and elders lay flat upon the ground. "Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise." Every good thing that can be ascribed to the Lamb is. In the glorious, deafening, overwhelming voices of the hosts of heaven.

You think to yourself, what is left? How could it get any more glorious than that? But it does! v. 13: "Then I heard **every creature** in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them singing: 'To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power for ever and ever!' The four living creatures said, 'Amen,' and the elders fell down and worshiped!" **Glory!!!!!!** Every mammal, every reptile, every bird, every fish, every human being...all joined together in singing praise to both the Lamb and the one who sits on the throne.

Do you see why this is so perfect for Christmas? Christmas is THE season for song. The season for singing praise to the one who comes to us from the very core of God who sits on the throne. And in these two great chapters, we have the greatest concert to God ever recorded.

The Centrality of Jesus. The Celebration. And there is one more thing. This text also offers **Certainty for the future**. Do you remember that scroll? The one whose seals only the Lamb was worthy to break open? Well, next year, in the year of our Lord, 2000, we will continue in our study and find the Lamb breaking open the seals. And we will discover some frightening things. In

fact, there are many who are scared that the very turn of the millennium itself will usher in some of the horrors that are spoken of in the breaking of the seals.

And if just the breaking of the seals is horrific, what must the scroll itself say? What awesome, overwhelming words will we hear being read from this scroll that only the Lamb is worthy to open? Do you know what? We never find out! The scroll is never read. After all this, the seals are opened, but the scroll is never read. It remains firmly in the possession of the Lamb of God who purchased our lives with his blood.

Here is one more great comfort that we can take from this text. The Certainty of the future. We have no idea what the future holds. We have no idea what will happen the minute the clock strikes midnight on January 1. World-wide catastrophe? I doubt it. But we don't know. A whimper? Probably not, but we don't know. Because it is Jesus, the Lamb of God, who holds the scroll. The future of the world rests securely in his hands. And every time we have tried to pry the future out of him, Jesus has resisted. When his disciples asked him what the end would be like, he would not tell them. "Keep watching," he said. "Be vigilant. The end will come like a thief in the night." But they didn't learn. Just before Jesus ascended back into heaven, the disciples asked one more time. "Is it now that you will restore everything?" Do you remember Jesus response? Essentially, it was "That's none of your business. You have work to do. Do it!"

We are closing in on a new millennium. The clock is ticking. The ball is about to fall. This particular moment in history may or may not be significant. But this text repeats subtly what Jesus said so clearly when he was on earth. "Don't worry about it. Follow me. Worship me. Trust me. I hold the future. I alone. I who have all power. I who have all wisdom. I to whom all the heavenly hosts bow in worship. I who share the throne with God the father himself. Your future is in my hands. And who am I to you? I am your savior. I am your sacrificial lamb. I have already demonstrated how much I love you. I have laid down my life for you. I have poured out my life's blood for you. I have conquered that great enemy of mankind, death! There is nothing left for me to prove. NOOOOOW. Will you believe? Will you trust? Will you relax in the certainty of the future that belongs to me?

There was a group of Seminary students who regularly played basketball at local high-school gym. They would throw their jackets and books in the corner and play for an hour. While they played, the janitor, who graciously allowed the seminarians to use the gym after hours, would grab one of their Bibles and spend the hour reading. One day, one of the seminarians asked the janitor, "What have you been reading?" "Revelation." One of the seminarians chuckled: "Yeah, right." Having heard one of his professors say that no one really understands the book, the seminarian asked the janitor, "Do you understand what you have been reading?" "Oh, yes." Chuckling again, the seminarian asked, "Well, then, tell me what it means." The janitor looked around the room, leaned into the seminarian's ear and whispered, "It means, Jesus gonna win." Exactly!

My brothers and sisters in Christ, "Jesus gonna win!" What is there left to say? What but the word of the ages. The only word that is the same in every language on earth. The only appropriate word of response to this glorious Christmas hope. Hallelujah. Hallelujah. Hallelujah!

SERMON DISCUSSION QUESTIONS **HALLELUJAH!** *Revelation 5:1-14*

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- *Read the text carefully. Where does the lamb appear? How is it that the lamb can be in the same place that, presumably, only moments later we discover to be occupied by "the one who sits on the throne?" What claims are being made for the lamb?*
- *The text is a combination of both strong and meek image. Which are which? Why is God's strategy for salvation so surprising? How does God's idea of victory confound the world's view of victory?*
- *Discuss what is occurring in the subsequent songs of praise. Who receives the worship? Why is this not offensive to God on the throne? Who, in the end, receives the praise?*
- *What does it mean that the Lamb is worthy to receive power, wealth, wisdom, strength, honor, glory and praise? Does he not already possess these attributes?*
- *Pray for each other. Pray that you all might experience the wonder and glory of Christmas in a fresh way this year. Pray for our trust in God's grasp on our future.*