

***The Vision of the Lamb upon the Throne:  
Redemptive Suffering and Nonviolence  
at the Heart of the Moral Order***

Revelation 5

Steve Hollaway

Harbor Church

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What if you could see into the control room? In most superhero movies and in many thrillers there are scenes of the seat of dark power, where the bad guy's plans for the world are revealed and we understand who is really in charge of all the chaos that is taking place. All conspiracy theories in politics imagine that there is such a room in which one or several people gather to plot the overthrow of the current order. Some of you must be like me: when I watch the news I wonder where the big decisions are made about the future of the world economy and the future of wars.

The Revelation offers us a glimpse into the control room. It was written to early followers of Jesus who were sometimes afraid to stand up to the power of the Roman Empire, people who lived in a world like ours with a good deal of chaos in economic and military affairs but with a superpower and large institutions throwing their weight around. People pursuing the kingdom of God must have wondered from time to time—as we do—whether God was actually reigning or not. Sometimes people who stood up for Jesus wound up getting slaughtered. When the elder John is given a vision of what is going on in heaven, he is given a vision of the control room of history, the throne room of heaven—and what he sees there is not what you might expect.

In some ways Revelation chapter 5 is like that familiar scene in *The Wizard of Oz* in which Dorothy and her three friends enter very presence of the Great Oz and discover that the nature of power is not what it seems at all. You remember when the Great Oz says “Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain”? Frank Baum was a skeptic, of course, about political power and about religion. He thought that much of it was fraud, just smoke and mirrors. The author of Revelation feels the same way about the government of Rome, the great Beast, but near the beginning of his story he takes us into the presence of the great God who really *is* God, not a fake god like Caesar. He takes us into the control room of the universe, to the throne room from which all power emanates. We see at last who is in charge.

We are prepared for this by chapter 4, with all these heavenly creatures worshipping God, singing (as we did) “Holy, holy, holy.” They sing that God is worthy because he created all things. Then in chapter 5, John sees in the hand of the one seated on the throne—this is God, He Who Must Not Be Named—a scroll with writing on both sides, sealed with seven seals. We know that last wills and testaments were usually sealed with seven seals. They were wax seals with the imprint of the maker's ring, a form of security for documents, like a password on a computer document. This scroll represents in more than one sense “the will of God.” It is God's purpose for history, the story that is about to unfold according to God's plan. But it cannot happen until someone breaks the seals.

So John sees that God has a plan, but no one in heaven is able to put it into effect. That is why John weeps. Then one of the elders of heaven says to him, “Don't cry. The Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals.” The Lion of Judah was a way of describing the Messiah, the descendant of David who was hoped for in the last days. This is an expression of typical Jewish piety, except that the elder says that

the Lion *has* conquered, not that he *will* conquer. The Lion is a symbol of power and violence. He represents the coming ruler's ability to destroy evil and establish justice. This is what even Jesus' own disciples expected, and perhaps what those listening to John's scroll being read in the churches of Asia Minor would have expected: a prophecy of a coming mighty king to overthrow the Roman emperor who set himself up as God. The mighty one will implement God's plan and establish his kingdom.

But then everything changes. Verse 6 is a pivotal point in the book, and it's the one thing I want you to understand this morning. John sees something he does not expect. He sees "in the midst of the throne" instead of a Lion "a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered." Instead of the symbol of power John sees a symbol of apparent weakness and vulnerability, a little lamb. Not only that, but it looks as if it has been slaughtered. We are not accustomed to seeing lambs who have been slaughtered, but for John and his listeners it would have been a common sight. It was something you saw in the Temple in Jerusalem and in pagan temples and even in the marketplace—a butchered lamb. And this is what John sees instead of a Lion: a slaughtered Lamb, but he is still alive and standing, "bloodied but unbowed."

He looks weak, but he is not. He has seven horns, symbols of perfect power, and seven eyes, symbols of perfect knowing. We are not supposed to think of these literally. The visual we are expected to keep in mind is the image of the slaughtered Lamb, because John keeps coming back to that.

What does this mean? It means that the only way God's plan for history could be carried out was not by a mighty Messiah with an army but by a sacrificial Servant who died for us. It means that Isaiah was right when he described that servant:

Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way, and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth [53:4-7].

Listen to what scholar Eugene Boring says about the significance of the Lamb:

The one who has conquered did so not through violence, but by sacrificing his own life. This is the power that enables him to take the scroll from God's hand and execute its contents, the divine plan for bringing history to a worthy conclusion and establishing God's justice [*New Interpreter's Study Bible*, p. 2221].

So when John gets taken into the control room of history, this is what he sees. God's plan for the world is being carried out not by a mighty general using force to do God's will, but by the humble servant who allowed himself to be rejected and tried and put to death. The one who shares God's throne—in chapter 7 he is said to be in the *center* of the throne—is the crucified Jesus, the Lamb who was slaughtered. To me this vision is very close to the heart of the gospel.

What is the world really about? What is the shape of the moral universe? We can get one image if our Christian God is fairly close to Zeus, sitting up on a cloud firing thunderbolts down at mortals who displease him. We can get that impression even from the history of Israel and the way the name of Yahweh was used in war. We can imagine, then, that the way to establish God's kingdom is by making war or by taking over governments through political means. We can imagine that it is only right to use the power of the state and the power of the sword to accomplish the will of God.

But the New Testament tells us over and over—and this scene makes it clear—that God’s way of working with humans to accomplish his will is not the way of force and violence. Yes, there are terrible scenes of judgment upon Rome and the forces of evil in the book of Revelation, but there is not one time when humans are told to carry out violence, not one time when a mortal is described as an agent of judgment. The judgment in the book belongs to God, who will one day set the world right. But *our* model is the slaughtered Lamb. The followers of Jesus are followers of the Lamb. When Jesus commends those who have “overcome,” he is not commending those who fought in his name but those who were faithful witnesses even to the point of death. Even in the symbolism of Revelation, when Jesus is pictured riding a horse and bringing judgment, the only sword he bears is the word coming out of his mouth. His truth, his faithful witness, is itself a form of judgment. And more than that, his redemptive suffering on the cross is a form of judgment. In the first Christian sermon on the day of Pentecost, the apostle Peter says at the climax of his sermon: “Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah.” His listeners are cut to the quick and ask “What shall we do?” The truth that the slaughtered Lamb is now on the throne is an indictment of a world system based on power and violence.

So the truth about the world, John is saying, is that the establishment of God’s justice depends on redemptive suffering and nonviolence. This is the life to which we are called as followers of the Lamb: a life of faithful witness in the face of opposition, even in the face of violence. As Jesus has conquered through his suffering, we too shall overcome not by taking up the sword on his behalf but by sharing his suffering and his resurrection.

When the slaughtered Lamb takes the scroll in his hand, the heavenly creatures around the throne begin to sing a new song. “You are worthy!” In our country whenever the President appears, the band strikes up “Hail to the Chief.” In the Roman Empire, whenever Caesar appeared people had been trained to shout, “Worthy! Worthy! Worthy is the Emperor!” But now in the new world of heaven, in the world that is more real than this one that is fading away, the citizens cry out “Worthy is the Lamb!” And why? “Because you were slaughtered.” Not *in spite* of the fact that you died and were a victim, not in spite of the fact that you had noble intent but failed in your mission, but *because* you were slaughtered. It was *by being killed* that you won the victory over sin and death and the evil one. By dying on the cross you have ransomed people from every ethnic group—set them free from slavery—and bought them to be the people of God, to be God’s kingdom and God’s priests. The ones the Lamb has bought—he’s talking about *us*. People from those lands where people ran around naked in their tattoos worshiping trees and spirit. The Lamb bought us for God by dying for us.

I love the way this chapter ends. John hears the voices of angels and heavenly beings—ten thousand times ten thousand—all singing together, “Worthy is the Lamb who was slaughtered,” worthy to receive the perfect seven gifts which the world thought he lacked: power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing. And then—and this is my favorite—John says “I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and in the underworld and in the sea, *and they were all singing*: ‘To the One seated on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!’” They worship Jesus equally with God Almighty, and it is not just the angels who are singing; it is all of us, every creature, all the birds, the crickets, the dolphins and the whales, the Albanians to the Zimbabweans, even the dead, all singing together.

Today is Trinity Sunday, and this might seem an odd text to tie to the Trinity. But so often we get caught up in the math of three-in-one and the mystery of it and fail to start at the

beginning. The Trinity was not finally formulated until the third century. It is a way of trying to describe God in a way consistent with all the Bible says about God and all our experience tells us of God. But the impulse of the church from the very beginning—the impulse which led to the Trinity—is to say that Jesus the crucified one has been taken up into God. That was the heart of Christian worship from Pentecost on. For two hundred years they argued about exactly how God and the risen Jesus were related, using terms that came from Greek thought. But Christians never questioned the basic truth: that the human and actually killed Jesus had been raised from death and raised to be a part of God himself.

That is the message of Revelation 5, a message that reveals the very nature of God and the nature of the moral order of things. It is the same message this table proclaims. God became flesh and lived among us. God loved us so much that he died for us. Jesus is the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world. And our calling is not to wave his flag or wield his sword, but to be followers of the Lamb in meekness and nonviolence. The apostle Paul says describing his own lot and that of followers of Jesus, quoting a psalm, “For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.” This is what earlier generations knew to be the way of the Lamb. It is the way of faithful witness. But even in that, Paul says, “We are more than conquerors through him who loved us. Nothing that happens, not death...not rulers...not powers...not anything else in all of creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Thanks be to God.