

“Christ the Lamb”
a sermon by Kyndall Rae Rothaus
concerning Revelation 1:4b-8
for Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco
on November 25, 2018

On this Christ the King Sunday, a reading from everyone’s favorite book of the Bible, the book of Revelation, chapter one, verses 4b-8. John is writing to the seven churches in Asia Minor, and this is how he begins his letter:

Grace and peace to you from the one who is and was and is coming, and from the seven spirits that are before God’s throne, ⁵ and from Jesus Christ—the faithful witness, the firstborn from among the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To the one who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, ⁶ who made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father—to him be glory and power forever and always. Amen.

⁷ Look, he is coming with the clouds! Every eye will see him, including those who pierced him, and all the tribes of the earth will mourn because of him. This is so. Amen. ⁸ “I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “the one who is and was and is coming, the Almighty.”

As you all know, Revelation is well-loved by people everywhere because it is so easy to understand. If someone is reading the Bible for the first time, I usually recommend they skip the complicated stuff and start here. Read Revelation from cover to cover and you’ll have Christianity sorted out in no time.

Actually, Revelation is usually only the favorite book for enthusiasts who are hungry for a solvable mystery, who like to think of the Bible as a riddle discernable by the clever. They approach Revelation like a good Sudoku or crossword puzzle or game of Clue—like it is a challenge to be conquered or a code to be broken. Despite John’s clear introduction in Revelation 1:1 that he is writing about things that will take place *soon*, the riddle solvers nearly always assume they are decoding secret messages about the end of time. So either John’s definition of “soon” is quite flexible or the riddle solvers have bypassed an important and primary clue. John’s crazy visions are not about the far off future but the here and now and soon to be. While some of John’s imagery is a reference to the coming reign of Christ at the end of time, the visions are intended to inspire and reassure people in their present lives.

To comprehend John’s main point in the book of Revelation, one need look no further than his opening words to all seven churches, the introduction we read today. Let’s review: Jesus Christ, ruler of all the kings of the earth, is coming. Jesus, who makes us into a kingdom, is coming, and everyone will see him, for he is the beginning and the end of all things. Jesus is coming.

In other words John’s primary message is a political one. Christ is King, and Christ is coming. Have you ever lived in a time or place where your political leaders made you feel desperate for a new ruler? Can you imagine a scenario in which John’s proclamation would be good news indeed? Can you imagine receiving his letter reassuring you that God, not whoever sits on the

throne, was really the one in charge? Can you see how that message would be oh-so-relevant to God's people right then and there?

Now imagine that whoever this earthly tyrant is catches wind of John's letter proclaiming that the tyrant is not really so strong and powerful as people think. How do you think the ruler responds when anyone claims to be greater or bigger than him? Does he respond nicely? Does he stay quiet and do nothing? Or does he retaliate? Can you see how John's message was not only relevant, but also dangerous?

His words were a challenge to the powers and act of disloyalty, yet the risk was worth it because the congregations were desperate for a word of encouragement. The risk was worth because God had broken in and spoken, and John could not be silent about that.

While Christians in the first century lived in relative peace with their neighbors, they were often viewed with suspicion and pressured to assimilate into the wider culture even when it compromised their Christian values. In certain cases, Christians were even persecuted. For John, the threat was very real and the pressure to do things like worship the emperor was a very real concern. The risk made the times ripe for a particular genre of literature known as apocalyptic. Through the use of vivid imagery and dramatic visions John casts awe-inspiring scene after awe-inspiring scene depicting a God whose power far exceeds any earthly power—but he makes these treasonous claims without being explicit about the who's and what's. Everything is masked in image and coded in artistry, but many of the images John used were images that would have been readily recognizable to the seven congregations and their biblically-literate people.

For example, if I told you I had a spectacular vision about a blue donkey and a red elephant, I wouldn't have to explain what my vision meant to most Americans, would I? I could describe an entire dramatic clash between an army of blue donkeys and an army of red elephants. I would have them go to war; I could give them symbolic weapons and you could probably piece together what I meant. I could even go so far as to invent a character called the antichrist—a powerful ruler who is anti-Christ in all his methods—and I could say that all his followers are marked with a certain number, such as the number 45, and you would all know what I meant. (Keep in mind, this is just an illustration!!)

The point is, apocalyptic literature isn't that hard to follow if it is written to you in the time period in which you are living. It only sounds nonsensical to an outsider who doesn't know the symbols of the times. I do not mean you need to know the "symbols" of the "end times." I mean the symbols of the time in which the visions were written. It does take a little bit of work for the modern reader to understand the language of Revelation, but it is less a game of futuristic guesswork and more like an archeological dig that attempts to decipher the art forms and symbols of an ancient world and what it all meant to the original readers and receivers of John's letters.

The good news is that art often transcends the boundaries of time so that even without a clear knowledge of every symbol and its precise meaning, the art can still speak. But if you approach it like it's a riddle, a science, or a mathematical equation, you'll miss the feeling, the color, the richness, the depth. You have to approach it like you've stumbled onto a massive painting in the

art museum. In other words don't get too close. Step back. Soak it in. Let it wash over you. If you try too hard, you'll miss the experience.

There is at least one symbol in Revelation that does not require any ancient knowledge to comprehend, and it is, in fact, the central image of Revelation and John's most common used symbol. You do not have to be a biblical scholar or a history buff or an art critic or a Revelation enthusiast to understand it. This particular image makes its first appearance in Revelation chapter five. I'm going to read this little snippet of John's vision to you (it's just five verses) and I want you to shut off your analytical mind while I read, okay? Don't try to figure out what the vision means just yet. Don't attempt to decipher, interpret, or assign meaning. Just listen. Listen and imagine. Or rather, listen with your imagination as if the story I am telling you is playing itself out on a huge movie screen in front of you. Let your screen fill edge to edge with images. Fill in the scene with color, with texture, with background, with noise—don't worry about getting it right. Let your imagination PLAY. You can close your eyes if it will help you imagine. Ready? Analytical mind off? Imagination on? Here we go. Listen:

Then I saw a scroll in the right hand of the one seated on the throne. It had writing on the front and the back, and it was sealed with seven seals. ² I saw a powerful angel, who proclaimed in a loud voice, "Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?" ³ But no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth could open the scroll or look inside it. ⁴ So I began to weep and weep, because no one was found worthy to open the scroll or to look inside it. ⁵ Then one of the elders said to me, "Don't weep. Look! The Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has emerged victorious so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals."

Okay. What did you hear? What did you see? I'm going to ask you to do something we don't usually do. I want you to turn to your neighbor and summarize the story.

Okay, now listen one more time:

Then I saw a scroll in the right hand of the one seated on the throne. It had writing on the front and the back, and it was sealed with seven seals. ² I saw a powerful angel, who proclaimed in a loud voice, "Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?" ³ But no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth could open the scroll or look inside it. ⁴ So I began to weep and weep, because no one was found worthy to open the scroll or to look inside it. ⁵ Then one of the elders said to me, "Don't weep. Look! The Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has emerged victorious so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals."

The gist of it is that there is this super important scroll, right? And it is sealed with seven seals, which means it is really sealed up tight. And there's this powerful angel looking for someone, anyone who is worthy to open to it, but no one—not in heaven, not on earth, not under the earth (so, like, really, really no one) is worthy to open it. And so John begins to weep. Perhaps he doesn't even know why he is so emotionally invested in the contents of this scroll, but it's like when you have a dream at night and your emotions are engaged even though you find yourself plopped into this scene that you didn't know existed before. It's all new to him, but still John feels how important the scroll is and there is no one to open it. John weeps and weeps. But then, THEN, a flash of good news arrives from one of the elders. "Don't weep, John! Look! The Lion

of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has emerged victorious so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals.”

Now, I know I told you not to analyze, but any guesses as to who the Lion of the tribe of Judah might be? Starts with the letter “J,” ends in “esus.”

But listen to what happens next, in v. 6, when John turns to view the great Lion of Judah, the only person or creature in all the universe worthy of opening the scroll. V. 6: “Then, in between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders, I saw a Lamb, standing as if it had been slain.”

Did you catch that? The great lion is actually a lamb, and not just any lamb, a slain lamb. A lamb is John’s favorite image for the Christ. In fact, “lamb” is used in reference to God four times in the rest of the New Testament, but in Revelation, the lamb appears twenty-eight times. For John, Christ as the slain and risen lamb is the ultimate image of God. This Lamb is the King to which the introduction alludes—a king whose power lies not in his weapons but in his slain-ness and his ability to rise from the dead.

Listen to the whole of v. 6: “Then, in between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders, I saw a Lamb, standing as if it had been slain. It had seven horns and seven eyes, which are God’s seven spirits, sent out into the whole earth.” Don’t think too hard about the seven horns and seven eyes—just imagine them in your mind and tell me if this slain lamb is weak or powerful, ordinary or extraordinary, defeated or triumphant, victim or victor? What does the image of a slain lamb that has grown seven horns and seven eyes tell you about the lamb, and what does the image of a lamb (instead of a lion) tell you about what kind of king Christ is? Biblical scholar Mitchell Reddish writes, “Through this imagery John declares that the only ‘conquering’ that is consistent with the values of God is conquering that occurs through self-sacrifice and love, not through violence.”ⁱ

John’s revelations seek to capture the imagination and evoke feeling. In many cases, the references are intentionally vague, not so that we will work like detectives to decipher the exact meaning of each symbol or to determine who precisely the antichrist is, but so that we will recognize the various antichrists that exist all around us, including the spirit of the antichrist that threatens to rise up in each of us. John writes so that we will be overcome with the grandeur of a God who interrupts our real world events with acts of great love and mercy. John writes to evoke our emotion and surprise when we turn to meet the great Lion of Judah and discover that really, the Lion is a Lamb.

Look, I’m not going to try and convince you that the book of Revelation isn’t weird. It is very weird. But sometimes we need a little bit of weird to shake us loose from our limited ways of seeing the world and to loosen our death grip on fear. The invitation to you on this Christ the King Sunday is to imagine that there really is another reality bigger and brighter than the challenges of this daily grind. The invitation to you is to join the kingdom—that is, the kingdom—where the king is a lamb and the people are a family and the world is vibrant with color, and there is no earthly power that can stop that lamb from rising triumphant. To quote the angels, the living creatures, and the elders in John’s revelation—he says they numbered in the

millions—they said, and we echo them, “Worthy is the slaughtered Lamb to receive power, wealth, wisdom, and might, and honor, glory, and blessing.” And the four living creatures and all the people of God said, Amen. Seated on the throne is a Lamb, forever and always, amen and amen.

ⁱ Mitchell G. Reddish, *Smyth and Helwys Bible Commentary: Revelation* (Smyth and Helwys 2001), 110.