

“The Lamb on the Throne”
Sermon Preached by David D. Colby
Central Presbyterian Church
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Scripture: Psalm 23 and Revelation 7: 9-17

The words of this Psalm as well as the final line of the Revelation passage, “and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes,” are beautiful and often heard at funerals. These words, so familiar to many people, can be said in the last hospital room and in the sanctuary. People who have not been in church in years stand with the congregation and find themselves saying these words out loud. “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.” It is a comforting image of God, the shepherd carefully leading the sheep from green pastures, through peril, ensuring that goodness and mercy follow us even in the presence of enemies.

“Even though I walk through the darkest valley,”¹ the Psalmist says, “though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,”² I fear no evil, for thou art with me. Most people find this a comforting image of God even and especially in their moments of sorrow.

Though I did have a conversation once with a very faithful and very thoughtful woman who wondered about its implications. Are we really just like sheep, she asked out loud. Sheep are not the brightest of animals, as this woman knew. But still, it is a beautiful psalm and one that lingers in our souls.

“In a mere fifty-seven words of Hebrew and just about twice that number in English translation, the author of the Twenty-third Psalm gives us an entire theology, a more practical theology than we can find in many books,” Rabbi Harold Kushner writes.

If we are anxious, the psalm gives us courage and we overcome our fears. If we are grieving, it offers comfort and we find our way through the valley of the shadow. If our lives are embittered by unpleasant people, it teaches us how to deal with them. If the world threatens to wear us down, the psalm guides us to replenish our souls. If we are obsessed with what we lack, it teaches us gratitude for what we have. And most of all, if we feel alone and adrift in a friendless world, it offers us the priceless reassurance that “Thou art with me.”³

There’s a story of a rabbi who always told his people that if they studied the Torah, it would put Scripture on their hearts. One of them asked, “Why *on* our hearts, and not *in* them?” The rabbi answered, “Only God can put Scripture inside. But reading sacred text can put it on your hearts, and then when your hearts break, the holy words will fall inside.”⁴

These are the words we want to fall inside our hearts for when our hearts break. We could spend a whole sermon on the words of this Psalm. But not today. For I am intrigued by how this second passage, the snippet from the Revelation According to John, uses and builds on this image of God as a shepherd guiding us “through the valley of the shadow of death.”

Here, in Revelation, it may get confusing to us. Who is a sheep and who is a shepherd? Who are the ones robed in white? And what is this “great ordeal” through which they have come? And what, might we ask, does it mean that they were “washed in the blood of the lamb?”

In some churches, you will hear these words often – usually in the refrains of a praise song, or in the altar call of the Pentecostal preacher. I am usually not too comfortable with the language “blood of the lamb.” For it can get said so often that it loses its ability to revolt. For this is a deliberately gory image – the blood of the Lamb. Enough blood that robes were washed in it. And when repeated over and over in praise music, it might make us American Christians ignore the reality intended by John. When we see so much violence in our movies and play with it in video games, we become all-too-quickly inured to bloodshed. Only when it hits close to home do we find it shocking. Only when the quantity of blood shed is on the level of the tragedy at Virginia Tech do we pay attention.

Thirteen days ago, in a quiet stone building filled with students and professors studying languages and engineering, blood poured out and hearts stopped beating and our hearts broke. How to respond in such an awful situation? Do we respond with vengeance or shut our hearts to the pain of others? Poet Nikki Giovanni, a professor on the faculty at Virginia Tech, offered these words to make sure that blood lost would not be forgotten, and that the bloodshed so recently endured would open the hearts of the community to blood shed everywhere. Maybe you heard her poem.

We are Virginia Tech.

We are sad today, and we will be sad for quite a while. We are not moving on, we are embracing our mourning.

We are Virginia Tech.

We are strong enough to stand tall tearlessly, we are brave enough to bend to cry, and we are sad enough to know that we must laugh again.

We are Virginia Tech.

We do not understand this tragedy. We know we did nothing to deserve it, but neither does a child in Africa dying of AIDS, neither do the invisible children walking the night away to avoid being captured by the rogue army, neither does the baby elephant watching his community being devastated for ivory, neither does the Mexican child looking for fresh water, neither does the Appalachian infant killed in the middle of the night in his crib in the home his father built with his own hands being run over by a boulder because the land was destabilized. No one deserves a tragedy.

We are Virginia Tech.

The Hokie Nation embraces our own and reaches out with open heart and hands to those who offer their hearts and minds. We are strong, and brave, and innocent, and unafraid.

We are better than we think and not quite what we want to be. We are alive to the imaginations and the possibilities. We will continue to invent the future through our blood and tears and through all our sadness.⁵

Then one of the elders addressed John, saying, ‘Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?’¹⁴ I said to him, ‘Sir, you are the one that knows.’ Then he said to me, ‘These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb (Rev. 7:13-14).

This image, the blood of the Lamb, the blood that poured out is meant to shock, not to become a sing-song chorus. When heard in that format, the words can sound “a little too triumphalistic, a little too full of certain glory.” But John’s witness is “far more subversive than triumphal when it comes to power.”⁶ The Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd. It is a subversive image for God. The blood of the Lamb, mourned, and inventing the future. And it is worth digging a bit deeper.

Let’s take a look at the context in which John was writing. For it is much different than our context, or at least his audience comes from a totally different location than we do. We who live in the most powerful country on the face of the earth will have trouble hearing this. As Christians in America, we continue to have some cultural protection, some cultural sanctions that make it easy to worship. I know there are those who argue loudly that Christianity is under attack, and there are those who focus on putting “Christ back into Christmas.” But, if we look closely, our culture, the culture of the empire, robes itself in Christianity. Look at any dollar in your pocket, and it will say, “In God we trust.” Each branch of the military is staffed with chaplains, the majority of whom are Christian pastors. On the throne in our time of Empire sits George Bush, who along with his wife Laura, are members of the United Methodist Church. Former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, in charge of waging war and America’s mighty military, is a Presbyterian and a member of a fine church. That is the context in which we live.

When John writes of a ruler sitting on a throne, the Christians who heard him had a very different image come to their mind. Like us, they too lived during the time of a powerful empire. And like us, they enjoyed some of the benefits that come with empires – a great road system, a booming economy, global opportunities. But unlike us, in their Empire Christianity was an illegal religion. The central belief of this young religion, that “Jesus is Lord” ran directly counter to the standard public greeting, “Caesar is Lord.” To say “Jesus is Lord” was to denounce Caesar. To say “Jesus is Lord” was to denounce the Empire. To say “Jesus is Lord” was to risk being punished for heresy and sedition. In Rome, for the most part, one could believe what one wanted to believe – in private. But in public, nothing was allowed to mess with the Roman Empire.

Caesar sat on the throne. Ruling with power. Acclaimed as God. His grasp extended throughout the known world. From his throne came the ability to reward those who bowed to him and punish those who did not. It seems that persecution of Christians at the time was not the result of an official Roman policy, but happened when random outbreaks of hostility occurred between Christians and their pagan and Jewish neighbors, outbreaks into which Roman governors were sometimes drawn, though not always willingly.⁷

Official policy or not, faithful Christians knew that their faith kept them at risk of the capriciousness of the Empire and all who ruled in its name. It was not easy to resist the power of the Empire. It was not easy to be a minority in a culture determined to keep things under control. It is still not easy. I hear from parents and grandparents how hard it is to raise their children to grow up resisting the culture of violence and learn how to ignore the allure of mass marketing. I know from teenagers how hard it is to do what you know is right when “everyone else is doing it.” When I lived in Delaware, not far from the Amish communities in Lancaster County, I heard how hard it was to be a pacifist during the run up to the Iraq war.

It is not easy to resist the power of the Empire. It is so much easier to ignore your conscience, and join the crowd than to risk your credibility, or your reputation, or your life. In an commentary on this passage, D.T. Niles writes, “the Christian stands crushed between the unyielding demands of our totalitarian faith and the oppressive challenge of the world for compromise.”⁸ It is not easy to act on what you believe. And yet that is what John is trying to encourage, as he writes to the seven churches in the Roman province of Asia.

Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, “For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it” (Matt 7:14). It is not easy to go through the narrow gate and follow the hard road, when the wide paved interstates of the empire beckon. Yet “salvation belongs,” the great multitude cries out in this vision, “salvation belongs” not to the one seated on the throne of the Empire, but “to our God seated on the throne and to the Lamb!” (Rev. 7:10).

It is not easy to be faithful to Jesus. Being a Christian is not for the faint of heart, or for those who wish for the path of least resistance. We follow Jesus, who said, “You have heard it said, “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” But I say to you, do not resist evildoers and turn the other cheek” (Matt. 5:38-39). We follow Jesus, who preached, “You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you so that you might be children of your Father in heaven” (Matt. 5:43-45). We follow Jesus who said, “do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth . . . but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven . . . for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matt. 6:19-21).

Those earliest Christians indeed faced random persecution and constant challenges to downplay their faith, to be complicit with the powers that be. And Revelation encourages steadfast faith. Revelation encourages resistance to the seductive power of the Empire. Revelation encourages churches to construct an alternate community where support is offered for the most challenging of times.

For the lamb is on the throne. The mighty power ruling over the world, John sees in his vision, is not Caesar, but a humble lamb, who had been through the slaughter already. And not even death could stop him. And to those who face persecution, the Lamb stands at the ready, to wipe away every tear from their eyes. For those who hunger for food, and for those who thirst for justice, there will come a time when they will hunger and thirst no more. For those scorched by heat, and struck by sun, there will come a time when all is well, and all is well.

“For the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes” (Rev. 7: 17).

Savior, like a shepherd lead us. Much we need thy tender care. Much we need thy tender care. Amen.

¹ As the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) of the Bible translates

² As the New King James Version of the Bible translates

³ Harold Kushner, The Lord Is My Shepherd (New York: Anchor Books, 2003) 9.

⁴ As told by Anne Lamott, in Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith (New York: Riverhead Books, 2005) 73.

⁵ This poem can currently be found on Virginia Tech’s website, www.vt.edu/tragedy/giovanni_transcript.php

⁶ Jimmie Johnson, “God and the Chaos Monster” in Journal for Preachers, Vol. XXX, Number 4 (Pentecost 2007) 62.

⁷ David Aune, Introduction to The Revelation to John in the Harper Collins Study Bible, 2308.

⁸ D.T. Niles, As Seeing the Invisible: A Study of the Book of Revelation (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1961) 139.