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Lesson: Revelation 7:9-17; John 10:22-30

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Years ago there was a program on NPR called “The Frugal Gourmet,” which was hosted by a man named Jeff Smith. Jeff once told the story of driving a remote road in Washington state when he came across a herd of sheep. He stopped his car and waited for the herd to pass, and eventually along came the shepherd riding horseback. The two of them struck up a conversation, and Jeff -- who was also an ordained pastor -- asked the shepherd this question; “When you hear the phrase ‘Lamb of God,’ what comes to your mind?” Not expecting anything too profound, Jeff was shocked by the response he was given.

The shepherd began by saying that springtime is very difficult, both for the sheep and for the shepherds. It is the time when lambs are born, but it is also a time of tragedy. During the births, the shepherd is often confronted with many problems. Sometimes a lamb doesn’t survive the birthing process, but the ewe does. Other times the ewe doesn’t survive the birthing process, but her lamb does. So the shepherd might be presented with a situation where over here is a living lamb that needs to be nursed but its mother can’t, and over there is a living ewe who has milk ready to give but its lamb can’t nurse.

You would think the solution would be to simply bring the two together, but the problem is that for sheep the nursing relationship begins with a recognition of smell, and a ewe won’t feed a lamb that does not smell like her own. When this situation arises, the shepherd must act, and a remedy is a bit graphic. Taking the blood from the lamb that did not survive the birthing process, the shepherd then washes the living lamb in it. “Out of death will come life. The lamb who died gives life to the lamb that is motherless. Now the mother sheep will accept this new baby, this baby washed in the blood of her own.”

The shepherd then said to Jeff, "That is what I know about the Lamb of God and the Good Shepherd as well."

I recall receiving my first full-fledged Bible in church as a middle schooler. The first thing I did was return to my pew, look around to make sure no one in my family was watching me, and I immediately turned to that weird book in the back called Revelation. I don't blame anyone -- adults included -- who say, "There is some strange stuff in those pages, I don't get it, so I just avoid it." I hear you. It would take more than a sermon to wade through all that strange stuff, but suffice it to say that I believe we don't need to be fearful of the book of Revelation, let alone avoid it. When we take the time to properly learn its message and its original context, the book can actually reveal a lot of hope. It wasn't until I was in college that a professor of mine pointed out how much of Revelation is actually thought-provoking and beautiful depictions of worship that intersperse all that strange stuff. And that is exactly what we have today in our reading from the book of Revelation.

The writer John introduces us to a vision of a great multitude, comprised of members from every ethnic background, standing in white robes before the throne of Jesus, singing. Yet, it is more than singing. It is palpable. What's described is like the chanting and pulse of an entire stadium at a World Cup match. Only the biblical image is that everyone is cheering for the same team, and the crowd is exponentially larger. "Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever!"

The crowd -- diverse in culture, race, gender, time, and language -- is unified in its declaration: all that is right and all that is good comes from God alone. Then it is explained to the writer John why this diverse multitude is entirely wearing white. They are all saints who have come through a great ordeal. They have been washed by the blood of

the Lamb, which turned their robes white, saints to the eye of God. They will be sheltered. They will no longer hunger. They will no longer thirst. They have found favor with God because of the Lamb's sacrifice.

Doesn't this description echo the scenario described by that shepherd riding horseback in Washington? That a lamb who is orphaned, hungry, and thirsty will receive all that it needs once the blood from the slain lamb is placed upon it? Verse 17 of our lesson concludes, "the [slaughtered] Lamb at the center 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." It is an allegory, of course, of what has been accomplished through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ; through him we have hope and salvation; with him we have the one who will shepherd us in this life and the next; in him we are given a new life and a song of resurrection on our lips. The lamb whose blood was shed becomes the shepherd; guiding us to water, and wiping away every tear.

That is a powerful vision, but it would serve us well to keep in mind where it fits in with the rest of the Revelation narrative. The reader had previously been told that there are seven seals that secure a special scroll, and as each seal is opened all kinds of awful things take place. Up to this point, six seals in a row have left the reader dreading what will transpire when the seventh is opened. But there is a delay. A "salvation interlude," as Dr. Barbara Rossing describes it, takes place before the seventh seal is opened. That interlude is this scene of a great multitude worshiping God together in one voice. This placement of the vision is an allegorical reminder to us readers that no matter how awful things get in our lives and in this world, God will protect us. This salvation interlude tells us that even if the most difficult parts of Revelation are transpiring all around us, God will always be our shelter. So the strange stuff of Revelation -- like the first six seals being opened -- may initially have us asking, "Who is able to make it

through all this?” But after the vision in today’s lesson, we are able to confidently answer; “With God’s help, we can make it through all this.”

That vision -- of a great multitude in celebration and worship -- is meant to invite us to reimagine our lives in a few ways. First, it invites us to reimagine our lives before God right now. To reimagine how each day of our lives is filled with possibilities for us to worship God through our everyday words and actions. Because when these are aligned with what is good, right, and just, it is a way for us to worship God each and every day. This vision also invites us to reimagine our lives with our neighbors. To realize that it is to our own disadvantage if we are satisfied with uniformity. We should have a reverent respect for the fact that humans are beautifully and wonderfully made by God in all of our diversity. Finally, this vision invites us to reimagine our Christian ministry in this world. If all thirst and hunger will be eradicated by God one day, how do we conduct our lives and our ministries in anticipation of that day? How do we approach those neighbors -- locally and globally -- whose eyes are filled with tears now, but those eyes have been promised to be wiped dry by the very hand of God?

This vision of a great multitude of all the saints shapes the our response to the gift of new life. This gift of new life is a resurrection song given to us by the risen Christ, our shepherd. This resurrection song has been shared with us and so many countless others from across the globe. May our voices join together with the heavenly hosts and all saints throughout the earth in proclaiming the resurrection song of the Lamb.

Thanks be to God. Amen.