

May 8, 2022 – Fourth Sunday of Easter

Revelation 7:9-17

⁹After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. ¹⁰They cried out in a loud voice, saying,

“Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!”

¹¹And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, ¹²singing,

“Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom
and thanksgiving and honor
and power and might
be to our God forever and ever! Amen.”

¹³Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, “Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?” ¹⁴I 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.

¹⁵For this reason they are before the throne of God,
and worship him day and night within his temple,
and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them.

¹⁶They will hunger no more, and thirst no more;
the sun will not strike them,
nor any scorching heat;

¹⁷for the 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.”

**At Martin Stadium in Pullman, on a football gameday,
you're bound to hear the sound effect of a Cougar growl
many times throughout the game over the P.A. system to
help energize the crowd. The sound effect is really close to
this one: ...**

Seems appropriate, right?

The only thing is ... it's not really a cougar growl. It sounds like it *should* be. Cougars, mountain lions, pumas, whatever you want to call them are powerful, stealthy and they look intimidating. They *sound* though, well, here's an actual recording from a rescue sanctuary in Florida: ...

Our stadium roar ... it's actually a jaguar, which is generally smaller than a cougar but sounds more impressive. Hardly anybody is going to know the difference and I think we can all agree the real cougar recording we heard doesn't really produce the desired effect.

When John writes the Book of Revelation in exile on the island of Patmos, he isn't trying to give an impressively fierce representation of Jesus Christ as his God. He relies on the image of the lamb, long held to be an animal for sacrifice, not exactly a threat to anyone. But again, the image brought

to mind is a bit misleading. The Greek term *arnion* is a diminutive. Not just a lamb but a little lamb. A lambkin. A soft, cuddly little lambykins if you will, the kind of creature you can't do anything but adore. You certainly don't take it seriously and "cute" is not a leadership characteristic you value for a figure set on an eternal heavenly throne, in any rational sense.

The imagery of Revelation is vivid, mysterious, sometimes startling, often unsettling ... and to be perfectly honest, sometime just downright *weird*. Perhaps the thing that makes the most sense in this passage is when John himself is at the center of his vision and is asked by the elder figure to explain what he's seeing ... to deflect and basically tell them, "Yeah, you tell me."

He's looking at a mass of innumerable people crying out for salvation from the living version of the puppet in Lamb Chop's Play-A-Long ... before a bunch of angels, and not to

be missed, four creatures like the ones described in Ezekiel that have six wings, way too many eyes and faces that look like a human, an ox, a lion and an eagle, respectively, all singing the cute little fuzzball's praises. It's an *absurd* scene and maybe John is in awe, but I don't know if I could do anything in his position but laugh.

And I don't mean to be irreverent. John's vision might not be so far off from where we find ourselves today. We look at the world around us and it seems bizarre, incomprehensible, kinda scary and unpredictable. And in the midst of this, we see people and other creatures that are oddly enough ... not all that phased by it. Not only that but they can speak to the awe and wonder and look for salvation to a God who ...

Doesn't seem all that powerful?

Doesn't seem to be the natural leader for such a time as this.

Who doesn't roar mightily but maybe just kind of meow-wows ... or bleats meekly.

The voice of God is supposed to boom from the clouds. That's how Hollywood has always interpreted it anyway.

Even if it's a still, small voice ... it's still supposed to have some command and authority, right? It's not supposed to be timid and dainty.

But what if it is?

What if the knowledgeable spokesperson for God is not speaking on behalf of a lion in Lamb's clothing but a true little lamb who has *been* the sacrifice, who has bled so that others made weak and brought low won't always have to?

What if the multitude who sing this strange-but-wonderful God's praises are dressed in white, not because they could afford the freshest and cleanest summer fashions, or were so perfect they could walk through the sloppiest of muck and keep the whitest whites white, but because they

recognized this lamb's blood is the only unlikely cure for this bizarre, incomprehensible, kinda scary and unpredictable world's ills?

It sounds preposterous, like one of those clickbait ads with a line like "Try this one weird trick to be saved from the time of trial and delivered from evil." But unlike the past 20-some years of supposed miracle cures like weight-loss pills, or hair-restoration creams or diabetes-reversing formulas, like, this actually works.

Now if you're nodding in agreement at this point, it may be because you feel assured. Assured that you grasp this all quite well. You know Jesus emptied himself of all the power that comes along with being God and allowed himself to be weakened and made a sacrifice. This is all fairly basic Christian theological stuff.

But where it gets trickier is centering ourselves and looking around at this multitude. Every people? Sure,

diversity sounds quite nice. Every language? Well, I think we all know Jesus didn't speak English. But he's OK with those of us who do. And my Dominican friends assured me we will all be singing praise in Spanish someday in Heaven because it's objectively melodic. I won't argue that. I've spoken here of the beauty of French and Creole hymns in times of great trial.

But every tribe? Now, you and I might look around and feel a bit less comfortable. We live in a country that has become unquestionably more deeply tribal in recent years in its politics. Purple states that get so much attention every 4 years are really, for practical purposes, blue cities and red countryside.

We have undergone what demographers call The Great Sort and separated ourselves. It's hard to imagine us coming together, even ... or maybe especially before God's throne. Church services on Sunday morning had served as one of

the few remaining places in our society where people who vote Republican and people who vote Democratic made an intentional effort to sit down next to one another and share in something together. But as of late, we Christians in America, too, are sorting ourselves. The ELCA became the ELCA, NALC and LCMC. The United Methodist Church, United Methodists and Global Methodists. These weren't 100 percent all about divisions along party lines but it's disingenuous to say that hasn't had a major role in what has happened.

Intentionally, I say we are people who vote Democratic and people who vote Republican, not that we ARE Ds and Rs. Particularly as Christians, these ought not to be our identities. If we aren't completely lost to the separation, we have to recognize that.

But our unity in standing before the throne, it's strained. I think we all know that. I think we all feel that. I spend a lot of

anxious hours wondering how long it can be maintained.

Many times I've entertained the thoughts of how people who see the world very differently than me can be guided by the same Christian faith, the same Scriptures, yes, the same God. I'm aware we navigate this so very often by avoiding the hot topics, but I'm also afraid this isn't very sustainable as more and more aspects of our life and our society become politicized.

And then this week, we are struck as a nation, as a people, with a massive development in one of those issues that has been contentious and divisive and driven by passion and conviction ... and latched on to as a wedge issue in our politics from either direction and that wedge has been driven hard. It's been this way all my life and longer. And the ever-more-likely Supreme Court overturn of Roe v. Wade is an extremely complex issue, that like much else, has been oversimplified to be seen as black and white, particularly by

the loudest and most forceful voices shouting opinions about it.

As this story develops, and it will continue to develop in the weeks and months and years ahead, I just ask this. That we permit ourselves to address it. I'm not naïve. I know it's not easy to do this with people who might disagree adamantly with our own views. But if we can manage to do this, I think it makes us healthier as a church. I ask that we listen to one another and withhold assumptions and judgments, mindful of Martin Luther's explanation of the Eighth Commandment, particularly that we are to interpret everything our neighbor does in the best possible light.

My own experience tells me we listen best when we listen to stories. I'm not going to spend this morning recounting how my own views on this have changed and been shaped by stories, my own and those of people I've come to know ... and I'm not going to expect everyone, or

really anyone, to change their stance on such things just by listening. But I do hope perspectives might change. That we might see things from different angles, even if those angles might upset or still seem utterly wrong.

I ask you to seek out the social statement on this from our church, the ELCA. I will soon make it available here if you don't want to wade through the World Wide Web. It's not a long document. It's 12 pages. It's not law ,that binds the members of this church, but it should give us insight into how this church has considered this issue. It's also 32 years old, so in considering it, we should also consider how our church and our society have changed in the intervening years. But in a section titled "Talking about our differences," it gives guidance to us that: "it involves powerful feelings that are based on different life experiences and interpretations of Christian faith and life in the world. If we

are to take our differences seriously, we must learn how to talk about them in ways that do justice to our diversity.”

There’s not a happy medium to be found in all this but I see a window of opportunity for progress in our relationships with one another. I’m hoping against hope that the vision is true. That we might find many, not few who are just like us, but many who vary in many ways, around us standing at the throne of God. And that like our God, we may be moved to speak powerfully, but unexpectedly ... not as a roar: but softly, purposefully and vulnerably, giving up something of ourselves, so that others might live more fully and we ultimately may do the same.

Amen.