Is There a Doctor in the House?

Revelation Chapter 5

I want to thank Jeanne for her reading **all** of chapter five. Many of us don’t read Revelation as much as we do other books of the bible. It is chocked full of language that describes an end time shrouded in mystery. Without a doubt, it is the most fascinating and misunderstood book in the bible because it uses symbolic imagery, much of which had meaning for the earliest disciples, but is often difficult to decipher two thousand years later. It was written by a man named John, whom many believe is the apostle who also wrote the Gospel according to John. Others believe it was a later disciple. Whoever he was, he shared in the sufferings of the saints of the church facing persecution because of their faith in Jesus. They refused to worship the gods of Rome or Greece. We forget that in the eyes their world, the earliest Christians were considered atheists because they didn’t worship the national gods. They were therefore treated as aliens in their own country and faced exile and deportation.

John had been exiled by Roman authorities to the tiny island of Patmos, in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea. Think Alcatraz in the San Francisco Bay, only much farther out, so far in fact, that there was no need for a prison. John wasn’t going anywhere; the island was his prison. Cut off from family and friends, home and country, John has this incredible vision, and he hears a voice that tells him to write down everything he sees, which he does; the Book of Revelation.

It’s an amazing description of what will happen in the end days, when Christ comes in final victory, wonderful days, terrifying days, cataclysmic, apocalyptic days. Many a person has tried to interpret the Book of Revelation in order to predict when the end of days will happen, with no success. I remember in 1985, a man in Louisiana sent numerous letters to all the churches in the state, warning us that the end time was coming, on October 13, 1985. The day came, but the end did not. A month later came another letter from the same man, telling us he miscalculated, and that the end would happen October 13, 1986, for sure. For sure. He reminded me what Jesus told his disciples, that they will neither know the day nor the hour of his coming, despite would people may say.

In the fifth chapter, John describes a scroll, held in the right hand of the one seated on the throne, whom most agree is God the Father. In a loud voice, a mighty angel asks, “Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?” Apparently, the scroll is the revelation of God’s righteous judgment on all creation, and the seven seals are earth-shattering divine acts that make it all happen.

Who is worthy? Who is worthy to usher in this new kingdom? In John’s vision, sadly, there is no one in heaven or on earth, or under the earth worthy to do that, and because there is no one, all is lost. God’s great gettin’ up day will not happen. And all the wrongs of the world will continue. Is there no one who is worthy, worthy to change all this?

Reminds me when the Philistines fought against Israel, how no one dared stand against the mighty Goliath, except the boy David, who slew the giant and saved Israel. Only David was worthy.

Story books are full of lone rangers who save the day. There’s King Arthur, who proved his worthiness as king by being the only one able to pull the sword out of the stone.

There’s Cinderella, who was the only maiden worthy to be married to the prince because her foot was the only foot that fit into the glass slipper. Only Prince Charming could wake up sleeping beauty. For my daughters, as they were growing up, it was Shrek.

The point is, we’ve always been fascinated by stories of heroic figures who rose to the occasion, and pulled off the miracle when nobody else could do it. I am convinced that is why we are so fascinated by comic book heroes. By the way, the latest Avengers End Game, when you think about it, it’s really Marvel Comic’s version of the Apocalypse. Who can save us? Who is worthy?

And in the Book of Revelation, John wept bitterly because in all heaven, and earth, and even under the earth, even among all who had died, there was not one person worthy to open the scroll, no one who could inaugurate God’s future. That includes Noah, Elijah, Elisha, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Ruth, Esther, King David, Isaiah, Jeremiah, none of the prophets, none of the great biblical figures of old were worthy. Because of this, John wept bitter tears.

I try to understand what that must have been like for John, that lonely man on that lonely island. Imagine in our own nation the results of World War II, or the Civil War, or the Revolutionary War without Eisenhower, or Lincoln, or Washington.

John lived in a world where people were either very powerful and wealthy, or powerless and poor, where might makes right, where the poor and lowly and the have nots were forever treated with resentment and contempt, where justice and righteousness were only words. Bitter tears.

Here in the church, today’s disciples stand in opposition to that kind of world, with a gospel of unconditional love for everyone. We may not be able to open the scroll in Revelation, for God knows the church is far from worthy, but we try, here and there, to make a difference. We shine a light on the path. And we try not to veer too far from that path ourselves, although at times, we do. It’s why we gather and pray, and break bread. We live in an in-between kind of time, between the empty tomb and the world to come. Until that day when all is good and just, where death and sin are no more, we wait and hope, at times weep, along with brother John, and cry out those same words of the angel, “Who is worthy?”

Who is worthy, in schools where little boys and little girls are taught on the playground of life who is in and who is out, who to play with and who to ignore? “Who is worthy?” comes the cry among those who struggle to survive, the unemployed, the broken, rejected, addicted, homeless, the mentally ill. And in those uncomfortable moments when we sit down with ourselves long enough to look in the mirror and see the person looking back at us, we hear our own words, “Who is worthy? Who is worthy to save?

Like the prophet Jeremiah, who grieved over the sins of Judah, who cried out, “Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there?” Or like the woman in the HyVee store who, upon seeing the stranger on the floor clutching his chest and breathing sporadically, cried out, “Is there a doctor in the house?” we too cry out. In many ways, we hear voices from around the world crying in desperation, “Is there a doctor in the house?”

Thank God, yes there is. Yes, there is. When all seems hopeless, yes there is. When we’ve tried to make the world a better place, and it just isn’t, when we’ve reached the end of our rope, when we’ve given it our best and our best isn’t good enough, when we’ve tried to make things work, tried to overcome, tried to make it right, tried to be a good witness, when we’ve done the best we can, and our friends misunderstand, when we’ve taken all the pills, and the aches and pains are no better, when we fear the end is near, the answer is yes, there is a balm in Gilead, there is a doctor, there is one who is worthy, who brings healing to the sick, forgiveness to the sinner, hope to the dying, and a place of refuge for those who have no home. There is one who will break the seven seals, open the scroll and let justice flow down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. He is the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, the Lamb that was slain, the One who died for you and me, who lives and reigns with the Father.

Until the day comes, and it will come, when that scroll is finally opened and all is peaceful and just, when the have nots and down-and-outers finally get their chance, until that great and glorious day when we rise to meet him in his new world, we, like John, are called to point to the signs that the Lion is still on the loose, and that the Lamb who was slain is the Lamb who lives.

The other day, I listened to a great woman who since 1903 has presented words to the world that have been read and wept over. They aren’t the same as those words we read in John’s great vision, but they are in the spirit of those words. They are found at the feet of this woman, words that define who she is. Hear the words:

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame, with conquering limbs astride from land to land; here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand a mighty woman with a torch, whose flame is the imprisoned lightning, and her name MOTHER OF EXILES. From her beacon-hand glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command the air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame. “Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!” cries she with silent lips. “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door!”

Words of Lady Liberty, written by Emma Lazarus, words that gave hope to over twelve million immigrants who came to the United States through Ellis Island in the early nineteen hundreds, hope that this new world, a land of opportunity, might be better than the oppressive world many of them came from. I wonder lately how worthy we are of those words of hers.

Is there a balm in Gilead for those who yearn for a home among us, who long to find a welcome mat? And in case you’re wondering if this is a border security sermon, let me assure you it’s not. We need secure borders and legal avenues for citizenship. For me, it’s how we treat neighbors stuck in those gray areas, especially the vulnerable and desperate, who have no power, no home, no safety, who cry out to God in their despair because it seems there is no one else to cry to. It’s why our church created a legal agency, Justice for our Neighbors to assure these people that God is listening, and so are we. It doesn’t answer every need, but it’s our way of trying to help Lady Liberty hold up that lamp beside the golden door, in the spirit of the One who came to save the lost.

It’s one of the ways we try to tell the world that the Lion is still on the loose. Is there a balm in Gilead, a doctor in the house? Is there one out there who is worthy?

This past week, in bible study, someone shared with me the story of how she recently attended her great grandson’s confirmation. What stood out for me was her sharing the story about one of the children being confirmed that day. The child was different, as all of us are different, only in his case, his differentness was more obvious. She had special needs that made it more difficult for her to get around than the others. Today, children with special needs often attend a special school, and it’s good that we have these schools that can provide needed assistance. Unfortunately, it means other children don’t always have the privilege of getting to know them and making friends with them. But at this church, where her great grandson was confirmed, all the children were on equal footing. They all played together and associated with each other, regardless of who they were. Everyone had a place in the confirmation class without exception.

Interesting, the very first person to be confirmed was this child, given her special needs. Now, she may not have completely understood all that was going on, but she was fully counted among the rank and file of confirmands that day. And every child that was confirmed after her witnessed God’s unconditional love for her; and therefore, for all of them, in a very tangible way.

This morning, as we receive holy communion, our Lord reminds us that though we be unworthy, all are welcome to his table, and the day will come when the scroll will be unsealed, and all may enter, that is, all who, like John on that tiny forgotten island, and the have nots of this world, like all who are desperate enough to cry out to him, to the one who is worthy. Who is worthy? He is.