

Changes

Psalm 30

John 21:1-19

Acts 9:1-20

Revelation 5:1-14 (11-14 originally)

The Scroll and the Lamb

1Then I saw in the right hand of the one seated on the throne a scroll written on the inside and on the back, sealed with seven seals; 2and I saw a mighty angel proclaiming with a loud voice, 'Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?' 3And no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or to look into it. 4And I began to weep bitterly because no one was found worthy to open the scroll or to look into it. 5 Then one of the elders said to me, 'Do not weep. See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals.'

6Then I saw between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. 7He went and took the scroll from the right hand of the one who was seated on the throne. 8When he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell before the Lamb, each holding a harp and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints.

9They sing a new song:

'You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, // for you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God // saints from every tribe and language and people and nation; 10you have made them to be a kingdom and priests serving our God, // and they will reign on earth.'

11Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels surrounding the throne and the living creatures and the elders; they numbered myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, 12singing with full voice,

'Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!'

13Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, singing,

'To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might for ever and ever!'

14And the four living creatures said, 'Amen!' And the elders fell down and worshipped.

The six weeks of Easter is a time to reflect on what we mean when we say that the man, Jesus, is the Christ. We do this by reflecting upon his life teachings, yes, but we do more so because of the unique experience of Jesus' suffering, his death and his resurrection. And particularly what this meant as a direct result of the Jewish Passover.

Passover is a holy day where the Jews commemorate the time when the death plague was sent to Egypt, by God, to kill the first born of each family. The Israelites were spared because they took the blood of a lamb – a typical animal for ritual sacrifice – and they spread it over the doorways, and therefore they were passed over . . .

Now a blood sacrifice was a very important part of the religious experience of our Abrahamic brothers and sisters (Abrahamic being the Jewish and Muslim faiths who share the ancestor of Abraham with us). It is important to know what this sacrifice meant. It could very well have been one of those rituals done by the masses as just another of those weird things that you have to do to follow the orders of some religious hierarchy. It could very well have been done with the same degree of blandness and half heartedness that we all have a tendency to do at times during various parts of our liturgy. But let's just ponder on the sacrificial Lamb a bit more for the moment.

Our sacrifices today are relatively painless and quiet in comparison. I mean, writing a check and placing it in the tray while organ music is playing is so lovely when we imagine what a blood sacrifice must have sounded and felt like. The animal makes a noise when it senses danger and it can get rather loud and fight for its life. Then there would be the silence that follows and the knowledge that a life has ended. We who have seen the movie, "The Silence of the Lambs" can imagine a bit more what the Jews must have experienced in preparing for Passover. And regardless of how ritualistic we may want to make it – I don't believe any human can really, deep in their souls, take a life of another creature that breaths, without experiencing some pain.

But those who really knew why they were doing it, found it a relief. Animal blood sacrifices were done as an opportunity to rid the human soul of some of its pain of sin. The greatest sin being the separation and lack of awareness that God is with us. Imagine for a moment someone who cared so strongly about the separation between themselves and God – that they couldn't take the pain. They so desperately wanted to rid their heart of the pain of loving God so much, and not being able to be near God. Like a child, lost and alone and missing his family. But killing yourself was not going to get you closer to God, and you knew that God gave you a life to live; how do you deal with the pain?

God called Adam to be one with nature and care for nature . . . and for all of us who have pets and love animals, we know the human/animal bond is strong. But from the beginning of the religious story of God and humanity, sacrifice has been there. In Genesis 3:21 God killed animals to provide clothes for Adam and Eve after they had sinned and discovered their nakedness. The blood and skins of animals have provided a buffer for the bond between humanity and God since time immortal. And what animal is cuter and more vocal for a sacrifice than a lamb?

Let us speed forward to Jesus' time. He celebrated Passover with his followers and was afterwards rather promptly led to slaughter, blood spilled, clothing shed and given to others. The sermon scripture that I just read speaks of the Lamb who was able to take the scrolls from the hands of God and read what was there. Jesus is called the Lamb of God – he is the sacrifice - the reference to Passover Lamb which saved the Israelites from the plague in Egypt. The Passover lamb saved the Israelites and led them to political freedom; but Jesus' witness was not to free his people from the oppression of political slavery, but to free them from the psychological pain of separation from God.

Let us look at Peter and Paul's sin from our scriptures from today. Peter, who loved Jesus very much, denied him 3 times when put under pressure. He certainly showed little faith little understanding and a lot of fear. Does one who truly knows that God is on their side do that? No. But Jesus gave Peter a chance to recover from that sin. Jesus asked him 3 times, "Do you love me?" One time for each denial. And since we all know that we are called to love God with all our hearts and minds and souls, Peter's pain must have been very severe; for he did love Jesus and therefore God. Jesus gave Peter the chance to recover from that pain of separation, and when the reconciliation was complete, Peter is called to Feed Jesus' lambs, tend and feed his Sheep.

So this brings about the question - who are the Lamb's lambs? If Jesus is the Lamb of God . . . who are his Lambs? For whom are these lambs being this sacrificed?

So often throughout Jesus' life on earth as a human he was criticized by hanging out with the wrong crowd. He was a soul physician hanging out with the sick to heal them. Those people we see as being messed up – poor, helpless, lost . . . they are Jesus' Lambs. Often times these poor people are the ones who have sacrificed, unwillingly as it may be, but they have sacrificed their joy and their hope. How much did the slaves know about sacrificing their lives for the riches of other people? How much do the coal miners know about working hard for little pay so others could live in fine houses? And how about those working numerous jobs and still being under the poverty line? These are Jesus' Lambs. And we are called with Peter to care for them.

And how about Paul? Paul was zealously persecuting Jesus and anyone who followed him. But Jesus gave Paul a chance to reconcile – to overcome his sin. Paul thought himself to love God so much that he would persecute the Christians, and it ended up that God so loved him, that he sent Jesus to Paul to set him straight. Paul sacrificed the rest of his life dedicated to spreading the word about Jesus. Paul is one of the Lamb's Lambs who lived his life fully in order to enable others.

Jesus was happy at his death that he lost none of those he was responsible for . . . care for those around him was very important to him. And he asked his followers to do the same. Caring for humanity is what the followers of Christ are asked to do - enabling people to be sacrificial lambs for others. In other words, helping people to not live for only themselves.

The human tendency to live only for their own feelings and desires is universal. Regardless of economic abilities, humans have to learn from life that they cannot think only of themselves. Those who don't learn this are called sociopaths, narcissists. We all know what we want and will do what we can to have it the way we want it . . . and yet, when we truly become aware of those moments when we have manipulated our will over the needs of others, we feel shame, just as Peter did – just as Paul did.

When we deny our desire to be in touch with God is when we are the most selfish. It takes so much energy to think about ourselves and how to get what we want. And there is so much disappointment when we don't get it. On the other hand, when we live each day as a surprise – letting God guide us, we can be invigorated and much will be revealed to us that we never would have known. We can see other people as more than tools to get our desires, and we become the fulfilled loving souls that God's children truly are.

From the sermon text, the Lamb of God is the one able to take and read the scroll – the will of God. Jesus is the one who can tell us what God intends for us, and what we will inherit. And what is our inheritance? I believe it is that we don't have to worry about anything. Christ was the ultimate animal blood sacrifice – the last sacrifice needed – we no longer need to do anything to forgive our sin of separation! We have the ability to be at-one with God. That is what At-one-ment (atonement) is all about. If we really truly could, on a day to day basis be more like Peter and Paul after their atonement with Jesus, rather than as they were before doubting, denying and sometimes persecuting. If we could know that we all really are children of God, not separated from God, but always able to have access to God – that Christ IS our brother – that we are Lambs of God ourselves with the responsibility to care for God's fellow sheep. If we could just do this and stop worrying, but rejoice; knowing that we are loved and OK . . . that we are each unique and all especially important and beloved. That Christ loves us – and we are to love others as he loved those witnesses to his care. Imagine what this world could be like if humanity were all these things!

And that is what Easter sacrifice is all about. Amen