

Introduction:

Well, all, we're continuing our walk through Revelation. We'll talk about chapters 4 and 5 today, although we'll focus on chapter 5 especially, which is why it was read to us a moment ago.

I hope that we'll notice the way way weakness relates to strength, how God & worship fit together, and a little bit about the worshipping community.

And let me say that some of the imagery in today's passage is my favorite imagery in the entire Bible. So I'm excited about it, at least. And you're always preaching at yourself, right? (They don't teach that in Seminary.) Let's pray.

Prayer:***Chapter Four:***

Last week we took a broad view of the letters John was told to write. Immediately after that, in Chapter 4, John was caught up into heaven, snatched right up into God's throne room. We didn't read that stuff, today. It's intense though. Here's how it goes:

All of a sudden he sees this open door in the heavens, and Jesus' voice telling him to come up here: In the Old Testament, whenever we read about "the heavens being opened," it's a clue that whoever is seeing these heavens open up, they're seeing into what's most true about reality, seeing into God's realm.

And there's this phrase "At once I was in the Spirit." John his having a visionary experience; he's seeing what we don't

usually see, right? He sees this:

“...there before me was a throne in heaven with someone sitting on it. And the one who sat there had the appearance of jasper and ruby. A rainbow that shone like an emerald encircled the throne....from the throne came flashes of lightning, rumblings and peals of thunder. Before the throne, seven lamps were blazing. These are the seven spirits of God. Also before the throne there was what looked like a sea of glass, clear as crystal. (4:3, 5-6a tniv)

Crazy things are happening from this throne; all the things that are described when God shows up in the Old Testament--lightning and thunder--are going on. And a sea as smooth as glass, and clear as crystal stretches out in front of the throne.

The sea, in the Old Testament, symbolized chaos, symbolized the unknown; it was the home of Leviathan, and Israel avoided it unless specific vocations--like fisherman, who were typically unclean--had to be on the thing. But in this image of what it's like where God is in full control, there is no chaos, no unknown, and no fear. The sea is calm and totally transparent. So this reads like chaos to us, but it's point is majesty and control.

And more than this; the earthly Temple had a small “sea” in front of it--a sort of pool that represented God's control over all things--land and water. We realize that the earthly Temple was just a baby-image, a play-toy version of what's really going on in the unseen, Spiritual realm (Keener, 173-174).

And there's this:

In the center, around the throne, were four living creatures, and they were covered with eyes, in front and in back. The first living creature was like a lion, the second was like an ox, the third had a face like a man, the fourth was like a flying eagle. Each of the four living creatures had six wings and was covered with eyes all around, even under its wings. Day and night they never stop saying:

***" 'Holy, holy, holy
is the Lord God Almighty,
who was, and is, and is to come.'" (46b-8)***

There is so much meaning packed into these creatures. They represent the whole of the animal kingdom, as far as early thought was concerned.

And more than this, they give us this image of the all-seeing, all-aware God, who reigns from his throne room, and where God is right now, there's worship.

But beyond this, John is describing for us things that we Christians in Pergamum, or Smyrna, or Laodicea have already heard. We know our Bibles, right? And we're super familiar with the Old Testament. And so we'd know that John is describing to us God's throne room and these angelic beings in language directly borrowed from the first chapter of Ezekiel.

There, Ezekiel is describing a scene in which God is actually leaving the Temple in Jerusalem, which was considered His

throne, and piloting this amazing chariot with a huge throne on it to his people who are in Babylon, in persecuted exile. The point is, of course, that he's left Jerusalem and he's with his people where they are: but this is described with wild apocalyptic imagery:

Some cuts--and see if anything you hear sounds like what John saw:

“In the middle of it was something like four living creatures. This was their appearance: they were of human form...” (1:5)

“As for the appearance of their faces: the four had the face of a human being, the face of a lion on the right side, the face of an ox on the left side, and the face of an eagle...” (1:10)

“In the middle of the living creatures there was something that looked like burning coals of fire, like torches moving to and fro among the living creatures; the fire was bright, and the lighting issued from the fire.” (1:13)

And Ezekiel described the wheels that these beings are near; and describes the wheels hubs, and their rims, and the way the angelic beings move these wheels and drive this chariot, which has “something like a throne, in appearance like sapphire” sitting on top of it.

“Like a bow in a cloud on a rainy day, such was the appearance of the splendor all around. This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord.”

(1:28)

What John describes isn't exactly what Ezekiel describes...but John is drawing directly upon this tradition of what it's like where God is. This should affirm us: John's vision is valid, it's real, it's in line with what Ezekiel saw way back when. If we're in these seven churches, we hear what John wrote and think, "Oh. This is legitimate."

And so John's there, in the throne room: And we see God at the center, surrounded by these angelic beings that constantly sing his praise. And then, surrounding these angels is this ring of 24 elders, dressed in white with Golden crowns. These elders, by the way, are meant to symbolize all God's People over all time. We read:

Whenever the living creatures give glory, honor and thanks to him who sits on the throne and who lives for ever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before him who sits on the throne and worship him who lives for ever and ever. They lay their crowns before the throne and say:

***"You are worthy, our Lord and God,
to receive glory and honor and power,
for you created all things,
and by your will they were created
and have their being."***

John is caught up in the throne room of God--where there is no fear, no chaos, but everything is ordered and right--and its ordered around God who holds all creation together, is the center of the universe, and is given the honor and place

due Him.

So in the same way that Ezekiel saw this vision of a larger than life, apocalyptic chariot leaving Jerusalem & coming to him, which described the simple truth that God is coming to make his home with his people in their exile, so John's vision describes in larger than life language the fact that God is at the center of the universe, surrounded by the worship of all creation, all angels, and all his people. And again, if God is at the universe's center, Caesar isn't.

As we look at all the things that are coming, we need to know that God is central, and being worshipped, and whatever else we do, we'll need to join in that worship.

This is what happens before the chapter that was read to us today. This is chapter four. But before we talk about chapter five, we have to talk about numbers.

Numbers

Because they are all over the place. We saw them in the letters. We just heard mention of seven seals, seven spirits, seven lamps, and 10,000 times 10,000 people, 24 elders. Numbers are all over the place, right?

First of all: I did not become a pastor so I could deal with math, you know?

But one thing to note, which will come up later is that in both Greek and Hebrew, all letters have numerical equivalencies. Every letter has a number value. People who talk about "the Bible code" and things like this use this fact to try and "decode" all sorts of words and numbers in the

Bible to mean various things. And while I think this is largely misguided, at the end of the day it's *misapplication* not *misinformation*. Letters and words have numerical value.

Also: certain numbers have meaning that is more than numerical, bigger than quantity. As authors of apocalyptic material, we can use numbers to talk about the quality things have. The numbers used to describe a thing don't automatically tell us, the readers, how many of x, y, or z, there are, but first—and sometimes only--what these things are like, the qualities these things have. That is not how we naturally read numbers.

So the number seven often communicates to us perfection: wholeness, completeness. This probably isn't new info for many of us.

And the number 12 does the same: It became important because of the 12 tribes of Israel. And Jesus took 12 disciples, right? Probably as a way to communicate the New Covenant that God was making with humanity around himself. 24 elders? It represents all God's People.

Tens and multiples of tens--especially 1,000--are numbers that communicate again perfection; a lot of these special numbers do, you know. 10 is a nice round number, so especially when it comes to lengths of time, it can communicate to us an appropriate length of time, the perfect length of time as far as the biblical writer is concerned. 1,000 tends to be shorthand, then, for a length of time that's long, a long time--but perfectly long, you know--not too short, not too long: like the baby bear's porridge.

77 is great, right? 7 times 7 is fantastic too! Can you all imagine, gosh, 777? That would be a great number, wouldn't it. So complete & perfect. But you know what would be terrible? 666? It's so close to 777, but its very closeness points out just how far away it is. We'll talk about this further down the road.

Or you know what would be fantastic? 12×12 : and maybe not just 12×12 --which would be 144--but man: what about $12 \times 12 \times 1000$: That would be an awesome number! 144,000 of something would be so rad, so perfect and complete, it would communicate to us so much information about the rightness of whatever is being counted. And we'll see, soon, 144,000 people worshipping God in this book.

We could talk about other numbers, but these are some of the most relevant ones for apocalyptic literature, and Revelation, too.

Now: sometimes numbers are just numbers: John was writing to seven "real" churches, you know. But there is an added depth to the fact that there were seven churches, and not eight. He probably could have found another one to toss in there.

I'm going to add some specific things about the numbers we see in Chapters four and five in the online post of this message. FYI.

What the Sam?

So let's talk about Chapter 5. John has just seen real worship for the first time ever. We've seen God's central

place in the universe, and all the faithful of God's people through all time turning to him. And God's on the throne, holding a double-sided, seven-sealed scroll. But no one can open the thing; and John's heart-broken because of it, because it should be opened, apparently.

But he's told not to worry: "Don't weep! See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals."

Now: John is mixing metaphors, here, right? Lion of the tribe of Judah is a statement about God; Root of David is shorthand—long-hand—for "Messiah." We see again this bringing together of Jesus with God Himself; Jesus is God, but he's also the one who has triumphed over evil and the evil one. Jesus, remember, is the "firstborn of the dead," the original martyr, witness, and because of it, he can open the scroll.

But John turns to look, and this Lion of Judah turns out to be a slaughtered lamb; the passover lamb, in fact, whose blood protected the Israelites from God's judgment upon Egypt who had enslaved them. See this? The Lion of Judah is a butchered lamb.

The butchered lamb would annually be slaughtered, and eaten, as a reminder of God's dramatic work in rescuing his people from persecution and evil, which our Adult Ed class has been talking about for awhile. And the lamb is described in terms that again, highlight its strength—horns were symbols of strength, and this lamb has the perfect number of them—and highlights its power as the one with the Holy Spirit—if we understand the seven spirits of God that way, and I think we should.

This lamb stands before the throne, with God in the center of worship, and he takes the scroll and worship just breaks out, right? But now it's not just directed toward God, but to this lamb as well, a new song is sung:

"...the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb. Each one had a harp and they were holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of God's people. And they sang a new song, saying:

"You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased for God members of every tribe and language and people and nation.

You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth." (8-10)

And we see more of Exodus, in this section. We could spend hours just lining up things we see here with things that happen in Exodus. The biggest echo is the promise Israel received then that they would be a "kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Ex. 19:15ff). But in Exodus, God was talking to Israel; that's been revisited here. God has re-made a kingdom, one made up of priests, certainly: but people from "every tribe and language and people and nation" with this Lamb as its center. What was a promise to one group, through this Lamb, has been made a promise to everyone.

And after this Lamb has taken the scroll, before this Lion of

Judah has done a thing, more worship breaks out, because of course it does. This is huge. (cf. 5:11-14). All creation acknowledges the Lamb & the one on the throne as worthy. As worthy. The english word “worship” comes from an older word that means “worth-ship”--acknowledging how worthy another person is to be esteemed and valued.

The triumph of the Lamb to open the scroll is a triumph that all creation acknowledges, and we’ll talk about what it means that the Lamb opens those seals next week. So read ahead.

But what do we see today?

Seeing: Worship

We see, maybe more than anything else, that Jesus is worthy of worship. That God is at the center of the universe, and anything that has breath acknowledges it. When John is given this vision into heaven, what he is meant to see is that the one on the throne and the lamb--they’re who we should be looking at. The message of these chapters is that God is magnificent, Jesus is worthy, and they alone should be worshipped.

We *could* talk about how this relates to the demands of Rome; we can’t get around the question of who is really worthy of worship here. But we’re not going to talk about it today.

Seeing: All Tongues, Tribes, Nations:

And we see this interesting thing, which we’ll see again: The people who God has made into His People, through the work of the Lamb, are people from everywhere. Being a part of

God's people has nothing to do with your heritage, now: you aren't born into it, cause you're family tree started in Judea. God's people, priests—people with total access to God—they're from every tribe, and every language, and every people, and every nation.

This is important for us to see, and we'll talk about it more.

Seeing: Strength In Weakness:

We also see that the roaring Lion of Judah, that way to describe God's royal power and might and fierce strength—the Lion of Judah is a butchered up, passover Lamb.

One person highlights that really, the only thing we know that Jesus did so far to receive the honor he gets here is die. The defining behavior of Jesus is death.

But it's a death that points out God's love, God's worth, God's commitment and care for His People. Jesus has died; and not as a victim of Rome, but, as this person puts it, "the definitive expression of the power and love of God" (Boring, *The Theology of Revelation*, 265ff.) He overcame evil.

The strength of God takes the form of self-sacrificial weakness. And the power of God looks like death, taken on the chin. It looks like a butchered baby sheep. The strength of God takes the form of self-sacrificial weakness. And the power of God looks like death, taken on the chin, looks like a butchered baby sheep.

So what do we do with this?

What to do?

First, let's call it a given that Jesus is worthy of the all the worship that he receives here. We'll call that a given, and assume that none of us in this digital space want to take part in worshipping the emperor, too.

Let's say, too, that what it means to be a Christian is to take on Jesus' example. I mean, much of what John is communicating here is that Jesus is the first martyr, the first faithful witness, and to take up his way of life means you'll end up persecuted by those who would rather keep the status quo—which from John's perspective, is devilish. And all this means that for us, we need to remember that self-sacrifice without violence is, from God's perspective, strength. Our strength is in the self-sacrifices we make. I can (and have) nuanced this in a thousand ways—ha! “A perfect amount of ways!”—but instead, I think, will just leave it at Jesus' example. Joining our self-sacrifice with God's desire to us use turns our weakness into strength.

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And let's assume that we care that what God does here is radically expand the special place a certain group of people had in his purposes. What God does in today's passage is reveal that those who had special privilege, special power, special access to the goodness at the heart of creation, they don't anymore. They don't have less; everyone else now has what they had.

The Lamb's choice to self-sacrifice for God has made it so that everyone, everywhere—all tribes, cultures, linguistic-groups, and every nation—have access to God now. Jesus'

self-sacrifice, which looked like personal death, but is actually God's strength, it opened access for those who had none. Access to God, for sure. But Jesus' non-violent, self-sacrifice of his own privilege and rights became the opportunity for us right now and every single kind of person to come to the Lord.

Our Moment:

Again, Jesus is worthy of our worship. And Jesus is worthy of emulating. What's true of this first faithful witness is meant to be true of all of God's faithful witnesses. Jesus' chosen sacrifice of his privilege and rights looked like weakness, but was actually God's strength. And that act, which looked like personal death, made it so that one group's special privilege was given to everyone, and now all kinds of people—all tribes, cultures, linguistic-groups, and every nation—have access to God now.

Bridging The Gap:

I think, *I think*, that one very practical—although not easy, not easy at all—thing to do is do what Jesus did. Sacrifice our privilege, blessing, rights, and power so that others can have access to God, and the good things of God.

There's nothing easy about this. It's not even easy to think about. And really, John's quoting 1,000 year-old-documents as he writes. It takes work and time to arrange change. But Jesus, in 30 years, got done what was considered inconceivable the day he was born.

We have privilege, power, rights, and blessing. If we didn't, we wouldn't be a part of this time, this morning. We'd be too busy trying to survive. We rarely see these things,

because we are so used to being us, and we all know our own personal struggles. But they are there. In today's passage, people are sorted by “tribe, language, ethnicity, and nation,” even though they're all earthlings. Socially, they have different experiences than one another. And Jesus, through his self-sacrifice makes the experience of one type of person—the Israelites—the experience of everyone. Jesus brings equality and equity to humanity through the weakness God turns into strength, as he gives up his rights, power, and privilege.

If we want to take a lesson from today's passage, it's not that we need to figure out what each specific number is specifically referring to in the contemporary map of nations. Instead, we have to first consider our rights, power, privilege and blessing. Then we have to consider what sorts of people are not receiving what we've received—especially when it comes to access to God, but also access to God's common graces and those “good and perfect gifts” that come from God. Then, just like Jesus gave up his rights for others, we have to do it, too.

I don't know what that looks like, but it will at least look weak, will not use violence to defend itself, will protect other people, and will be led by God—all qualities consistent with the Passover lamb.

What I'm saying is that to be a Christian who is like the Lion of Judah, we've got to use our power for those who don't have what we've got. And just like Israel lost their special place, we might lose something when we use our privilege and blessing for other people. We'll at least lose membership in the club of people who do for themselves

what they want. But maybe that's not so big a loss.

Conclusion:

Look, I wish I could tell us, just, like, “This is about Russia, and you personally can do whatever you want.” That's not it at all. Chapters four and five are all about Jesus as the first faithful witness, who chooses self-sacrifice to protect others and bring to all the different groups of people that exist an equal opportunity access God. Because of it, Jesus' weakness is actually God's power, and he is worthy of all the worship all creation can offer.

How do we apply that? I think we work against every inequality among the groups of people that exist in the world. If we're a part of a group that's gotten more than other groups, we give up what we've got because Jesus did, knowing it'll cost us, but it's the evidence of God's strength. We do more than be good; we fight for good. We do more than be good, we fight for good, and our fight takes the form of chosen weakness, privilege-and-power-divestment until everyone has practical, equal access to God's goodness in all its forms. And if anything good comes of our work, we worship God, and when we do, we'll do it alongside others who weren't as free to worship God before we acted.

Just naturally—although I want to see it as God's orchestration—I think this deeply, deeply connects with our moment in the world. But that's just me. What do you think we do with Revelation four and five? Look at it again, and be open to discovering what principles of behavior we can see in how Jesus uses what he's got, why, and what happens as a result of it.

Extras: Numbers in Chapters 4 & 5

And because we always want to know, let's look in particular at a couple of these numbered things we see in chapters 4 & 5 of Revelation. I'm thinking here of the 24 elders and the 7 spirits of God.

As far as the 24 elders go, what we can say for sure is that they represent faithful people. They stand in for the faithful people of God; the ones who overcome. In the Roman world, crowns were given to those who were victorious in Roman games; and especially in games devoted to gods, winners were given golden crowns (cf. Keener, 172).

Now, as 12 & 12, they may be representative of God's Old Covenant people, the 12 tribes who came from the 12 sons of Jacob and God's New Covenant people, the 12 apostles. Wearing white robes, which were priestly robes, they're probably supposed to point us to the way God's people are a kingdom of priests.

The 24 may be a reference to something we read about in 1 Chronicles 24, which is David divvying up Israel's priests into 24 different teams. And again: the point is that we're looking into a scene where God is receiving worship from His priestly people.

And knowing John; it may be the case that we're supposed to think of ALL these things, on some level. We're supposed to see all sorts of imagery piled onto this group; but the point of them, apart from who exactly they represent is that God is worthy of the worship he receives from His priestly people.

And the "7 Spirits of God" is a little more awkward. I haven't found a satisfying answer to this. I think it may be an apocalyptic way to talk about the Holy Spirit; seven is more powerful than one, more complete, so this might be a way to talk about the perfection of the Holy Spirit that both God on His throne and the Lamb have a unique relationship with. This would be supported by a couple things: one way to translate this is "the sevenfold Spirit," and this is likely drawn from the imagery of Zechariah 4, where Zechariah sees "a gold lampstand with a bowl at the top and seven lamps on it, with seven channels to the lamps" (4:2). When Zechariah says, "What the Sam is going on, Lord?" God answers: "not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit.

This ain't gospel; just my educated guess.