

“Who Is Worthy to Open the Scroll?”

Revelation 5:1-14

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For most of my life I have found the book of Revelation terribly confusing and at least a little bit frightening. It has always felt very distant to me, written for a time and a place and a people who had very little in common with me. So, for most of my life I had managed to let Revelation sit quietly at the end of my Bible, hoping that if I ignored it, maybe it would ignore me.

Then one day, quite unexpectedly, I realized that Revelation was written precisely for people like you and like me, and precisely for a time such as this. It was written to people who lived in the most powerful nation on earth—a nation whose military might reached to the farthest corners of the earth, an Empire that could make other nations tremble with every rattle of its saber. It was written to people living in a nation that dominated the economics of the world—when the Empire sneezed the rest of the world caught a cold. Revelation was written to Christians who lived in the *first* century super-power, the nation that dominated the world, the Roman Empire.

Like us, those early Christians lived in a world deeply divided between the rich and the poor, the first world and the third world, the economic elite and the economically exploited. And the Christians of that day found themselves on both sides of the economic divide. We tend to think of early Christians as poor and persecuted, living in the catacombs and hiding from the Romans. And it is true that church history is filled with stories of martyrs executed by the Roman government or fed to the lions.

But the Christians of the Empire did not all suffer in those early days. Many Christians, particularly those in the churches of Asia Minor, the ones to whom John of Patmos was writing, enjoyed the benefits of the Empire’s economic and military power. They found themselves loyal to the Kingdom of Heaven on the one hand, but also deeply invested in the continued prosperity of the Kingdom of Rome on the other. They were merchants, tradesmen, political leaders. They were lawyers, stock analysts, web designers, and stockholders. They enjoyed the benefits of economic prosperity. They sent their children to the best universities. They hosted dinner parties and spent their afternoons sipping skinny vanilla lattes at Starbucks. They went to plays and the theater, rented movies from Blockbuster, and attended games at the coliseum, doing the tomahawk chant and cheering on the Braves.

The Book of Revelation was written to people not so unlike us after all. Like us, they had days when they wondered about truth and meaning. They wondered what it meant to be Christians living in a prosperous land. They wondered how to make sense of their lives. The government propaganda in the newspapers and on CNN and Fox News talked about the *Pax Romana*, about the great peace that the Roman Empire was bringing to the world. Talking heads claiming to be in the “no spin zone” of objective truth assured them that what was in the best interest of Rome was also in the best interest of the world at large.

But deep down inside they knew—they saw—they heard the news behind the news, the *Pax Romana* wasn’t so peaceful after all. They lived in the most violent

country in the world. Their sons and daughters were sent to far away lands to enforce Rome's military might. Their crime rate was the highest in the world. More and more criminals were sentenced to public execution—to electrocution, to lethal injection, to crucifixion. There was unrest among the poorer classes. Riots erupted in the streets of Rome and Alexandria and New Orleans. Bandits waited in the shadows to prey on the unwary, whether on the road from Jerusalem down to Jericho or on the streets of Los Angeles. Poor kids, with no hope for the future, pulled guns on each other.

They were not so unlike us after all.

Like us, those early Christians would lie awake at night and wonder how to make sense of the world, wonder what was true and right and good. They would ponder what it meant to live a good life, to be successful, to be Christian. And on some nights, perhaps suffering from depression or stress-induced insomnia, they restlessly wondered whether indeed life had any purpose or meaning at all.

As night slipped into early morning, their thoughts would drift to their broken marriages and dead-end careers, the dreams they had once thought were promises. What had happened to the Great Roman Dream of 2.3 kids and a dog and a nice house in the suburbs? They *had* all of that, and their lives still felt empty. What had happened to fairy tale promises of happily ever after? Their lives were a blur of long work weeks, high stress, too little money, fighting with spouses. The Empire had promised them so much. But where were those promises now?

And so they would lie awake at night and despair. They would despair—and they would pray—that there was some deeper meaning to it all, that beneath the violence and the loneliness and the discontent there was some deeper purpose at work in the world. That somewhere, behind the scenes, beyond their experience, there was some deep Truth, some elemental meaning, some purpose to life that made all of *this* make sense. And they longed to hear it. Among all the voices that claimed to speak the truth to them, among all of the spin and political talking points, they waited for a Truth that resonated, that touched them, a Truth that proved itself worthy of being followed and trusted.

They were not so unlike us after all.

One of those early Christians, John of Patmos—the writer of the book of Revelation—had a vision one night as he lay awake pondering the meaning and purpose of his life. He writes of that vision, “After this I looked, and there in heaven a door stood open! And a voice said, ‘Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this!’” And so John, in his vision went up into heaven and saw God, the Almighty, seated on a throne. And in his right hand he held a scroll, written on the front and the back, a scroll that contained all of the truth about existence and meaning, a scroll that could make sense of the world.

How many times in my life—in the midst of wrestling with a difficult decision or feeling despair over the senseless violence we inflict upon one another—how many times have I wished that God would just appear to me in a vision and explain it all to me, or rent a billboard on I-85 and, in giant letters that I could not mistake, explain to me what course my life should take, remind me who and whose I am, tell me what greater purpose my life has served. Right there where I could see it, in neon lights, so there could be no doubt. A message from God. Haven't you ever wished for that?

And that is precisely what John of Patmos, the writer of Revelation, sees in his vision. Not a billboard, but a scroll. And on that scroll, written on the front and the back,

a message—not just for John or for you or for me—but a message for all the world, for all of creation. A scroll revealing to us the meaning and purpose of life. Can you imagine? Right there before our eyes, a scroll containing the deepest truths about existence—the meaning and the purpose of human history. “There it is!” John must have shouted. “This is what we have been praying for! Tell us what is written on the scroll!”

But as he looks closer, John sees that the scroll is sealed with seven seals so that it cannot be opened or read. The truth, so close, yet remains hidden. You see, such deep truth and meaning cannot be revealed by just anyone. It can only be revealed by one who is truly worthy of such things. But who, John thinks, is worthy? Who in our world speaks deep truth? Who can tell us what life is truly about? Who can reveal to us how we should live lives of meaning and purpose? Who is worthy of our trust and allegiance? The government? The media? The church? The university? Who?

And so the call goes out from the angel to all the world: “Who is worthy? Who is worthy? Who can open the seals? Who can open the scroll and read its mysteries? Who can tell us the truth about life?”

The call goes out to the scientists. “Open the scroll and tell us the meaning of life!” But they cannot. They can show us pictures of galaxies light years away and land robots on Mars. They can clone sheep and tinker with our genes. But they cannot tell us what is fundamentally true about our life. They cannot open the scroll. Not Newton, not Einstein, not Stephen Hawking. They are not worthy to tell us what is ultimately true.

The call goes out to the teachers and the philosophers who carry the wisdom of the ages. “Open the scroll and tell us the truth about life!” But they cannot. They can write of shadows moving dimly on cave walls. They can ponder the Numinous and the Ego. They can prove that they exist by their ability to doubt their own existence. But they cannot open the scroll. Not Plato, not Descartes, not Marx or Arendt or Murdoch. They are not worthy to tell us what is ultimately true.

The call goes out to the political leaders with their carefully orchestrated campaign strategies, with their plans for economic growth, universal healthcare, and no child left behind. “Tell us the truth about life!” But they cannot open the scroll either. Not George W. Bush or John McCain, not Hillary Clinton or Barack Obama. Not Roosevelt or Lincoln or Washington. They are not worthy to tell us what is true.

The call goes out to the leaders of corporate America with their slick advertising campaigns and beautifully airbrushed supermodels, with their catchy slogans promising easy answers to all of life’s problems. “Tell us the truth about life!” But they cannot open the scroll either. No matter how many times they say “Just Do It” or promise to be “The Real Thing,” they cannot open the scroll. They are not worthy to tell us what is true.

So the call goes to the religious leaders with our expensive seminary educations, able to read the Bible in Hebrew and Greek, well-versed in the theology of Calvin and Augustine and Aquinas and all the great Christian thinkers. But we are not worthy, either. Not even the saints are worthy. Not Mother Teresa or Martin Luther King, not Francis or Irenaeus, not even Abraham or Sarah, King David or Paul the Apostle. No one is found worthy to open the scroll. No one in heaven or on earth or under the earth is able to open the scroll or to look into it. The scroll that contains the deep Truths about life remains sealed. No one is found worthy to tell us what is true.

When the scroll cannot be opened, John says, “I began to weep bitterly.” So close to understanding the meaning and purpose of life; so close to discovering who is worthy of ultimate allegiance, and yet the scroll remains sealed. The truth about life remains hidden and unknown. And so John weeps.

I imagine that you know that kind of weeping. I imagine you have felt it. I know I have. It is the sort of weeping that comes from the depth of your soul in those moments when life seems to have lost all meaning, when existence seems to have no purpose. It is the weeping of a young professional, overworked and underpaid, trapped in the unhappiness of a meaningless job. It is the weeping of a little girl with her face buried in a pillow, drowning out the sound of her parents’ fighting that never seems to stop. It is the weeping of a woman whose aging mother has forgotten her, who just stares at her blankly without a glimmer of recognition. It is the weeping that comes in our darkest moments, when the future seems futile. When our steps are weary and our hearts grow faint. When we lack the strength to muster even one more step. It is the weeping that comes when we realize that no one is worthy to open the scroll.

But into the midst of our bitter weeping comes the elder. “Do not weep,” he says. “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.”

Who is this who will comfort our weeping? Who is this who will reveal to us the work of God in the world? Who is this who will come to us in our late night desperation and assure us that there is something more to this life than meets the eye? Who is this Lion of Judah? Who is this mighty warrior?

He has conquered. *He* is worthy. *He* can reveal to us the deep Truth of life.

But when we turn to see this great warrior, this mighty conqueror, this Lion, this king of the jungle—what do we see? Only a lamb, standing as if it had been slaughtered, a puny sheep without even the good sense to keep himself from crucifixion.

This is the one who is worthy? *This* is the one in whom our hope rests? *This* is the one with the power to make sense of our lives?

The military leaders scoff: “This is no mighty lion, no conquering warrior. He has not been victorious! He is not capable of Shock and Awe! He has been slaughtered by the sword! How can our hope rest in *him*? Our hope lies in having the military strength to subdue the world!”

The political leaders chide him: “This is no leader, but a follower. This is no shepherd, but only a sheep. Our hope lies in those with charisma, those who can win followers with a handshake, a promise, and a well-scripted photo op. This Lamb, despised and crucified by the crowds, cannot be worthy to open the scroll.”

The teachers and philosophers dismiss him as inferior: “This one does not have the wisdom of an owl, but only the simple mind of a lamb. How can he reveal the truth when he speaks in stories that even the common people can understand?”

The economic leaders hardly glance at him: “To make it in this world you have to have an image, a gimmick, that intangible star power. The slaughtered Lamb look just doesn’t cut it. How can he be the one to reveal the truth?”

The religious leaders are embarrassed by him: “People want to worship a God who is strong and powerful, someone who will reward them with comfort and prosperity, someone they can strive to be like. We can’t preach about this slaughtered Lamb, this meek one who teaches love for our enemies and compassion for the poor—our pews

will be empty! How can he be the one who is worthy?"

And yet, according to John's Revelation, *this* is the one to whom the scroll is given. Over all the protests of the Empire, *this* is the one who is worthy. *This* is the one who can open the scroll. *This* is the one by whom the Truth is revealed, *not* by the might of the military leaders, *not* by the promises of the political leaders, *not* by economic gurus or the CEOs of multi-billion dollar corporations, *not* by the products we buy or the comfort we pursue, *not* by the scientists or philosophers, the scholars or teachers, not even by the religious leaders, if you can dare to believe it. Not by anyone but *this* one—the Lion of Judah, the Slaughtered Lamb, this Jesus, the Christ. In *him* the truth is revealed. In *him* meaning resides. In *him* rests the vision of hope for our future.

So as we gather here this morning, as we stand in this contested space between the old world and the new, between the Kingdom of God and the kingdoms of the world, as we listen to the clamor of voices claiming to be worthy of our trust and allegiance, claiming to know what is best for our world, who is it that *we* declare to be worthy? What is it that *we* declare to be true? In whom do *we* place *our* hope for the future? In the living of our lives, who is it that we truly worship?

When we gather to worship our God in this place, we say to the kings of the earth, "You are not worthy. We will not worship you." We say to the Democrats and to the Republicans, "You are not worthy. We will not worship you." We say to our economic leaders, "You are not worthy. We will not worship you." We say to the seductions of wealth and security, of prestige and honor, "You are not worthy; you are not true. We will not worship you."

And then may we fall to our knees in the presence of the Slaughtered One, and may we shout with the elders, "To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever! Amen."¹

Notes

¹ The genesis of this sermon was a course on the book of Revelation entitled "Apocalypse Now!," taught at Columbia Theological Seminary by Charles L. Campbell and Stanley P. Saunders, two profound teachers to whom I am deeply indebted. The exegesis is informed by the work of Wes Howard-Brook and Anthony Gwyther, *Un-veiling Empire: Reading Revelation Then and Now* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1999). The sermon was first preached at Fort Hill Presbyterian Church in Clemson, S.C.