

**Sermon for Sunday, May 1, 2022**  
**Third Sunday of Easter**  
**“Worthy is Christ, the Lamb Who Was Slain”**  
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**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church Decorah, Iowa**

**Revelation 5:1-14**

Our text from Revelation this morning is the most important text in the book of Revelation. It reveals Christ as the Lamb who was slain. It reveals very clearly who God is and how God works in the world. I want to set this up for you by first telling you a story. In the fall of 1982, I spent a semester in Germany at a German Language School. I had a room in a private home. I rarely saw my host, but there was one meal a week that I shared with the family, Saturday brunch. Mostly we had good conversations as they tried to make this foreigner feel welcome. But sometimes the conversation would turn to politics. When they spoke about World War II and Hitler, I heard a whole new way of viewing history. For me, raised and educated in the United States, Hitler was the embodiment of evil. But they didn't see him that way at all. Hitler had done good things for the German people, restoring their pride and rebuilding the nation, putting people back to work. To them Hitler had been *Der Führer*, a wise and benevolent leader. He offered a vision of the future that was compelling to many Germans who were impoverished in the aftermath of World War I. At the time, many saw him as the Savior of Germany come to establish a perfect State - the Third Reich. “*Heil Hitler!*” was the Nazi salute and it meant literally, “salvation to Hitler.” It was a ritual that unified Germans. It impacted every part of public life. The Hitler salute showed one's loyalty and allegiance to Hitler and his vision for the future. To refuse to give the Hitler salute was to invite suspicion and persecution. Many Germans followed Hitler with blind and unquestioning loyalty, and they truly believed in the glorious future he would bring them. It wasn't until after the war that most Germans learned just how blind they had been. When the concentration camps were emptied, the world learned that it wasn't salvation that *Der Führer* had come to bring.

What makes a good leader? What we look for in a leader says a lot about who we are, our values and our hopes and dreams. Every four years the people of the United States go through the process of electing a leader. We have a national struggle to define the kind of person we want to lead us. What we look for in a leader depends on what kind of future we envision for our country. It is all part of the process of trying to create a “more perfect union.” When times are difficult, we look for an individual with special gifts to lead the nation. We may look for qualities of intelligence, morals, or faith. Do we need an expert in business who can restore the economy? Do we need a strong military leader who can guarantee our security and status in the world? Who will make our lives better? Who will get us to the Promised Land?

These hopes and dreams are common to all people. How are we going to create a better world, a world where peace and justice exist for everyone? And who can help us create that better world? The answer to that question is what the prophet John shares with us in Chapter 5. “**Then I saw in the right hand of the one seated on the throne a scroll ... sealed with seven seals.**” Most scholars believe that the scroll represents God's plan for the redemption of the world, a plan to establish God's reign of justice and peace on the earth. John sees a mighty angel asking the ques-

tion, **“Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?”** In other words, who will accomplish God’s plan? Who will establish peace and justice throughout the earth? Who will lead us to a better world? John broke into tears when he learned that **“no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or to look into it.”** No human being had the knowledge or skill. No human being was capable or worthy.

You and I living today in the United States might hear that and yawn. What’s the big deal? But to Christians living back then in the Roman Empire, this statement was deeply political. Rome offered a compelling vision for the world. The Roman Emperors were worshiped as divine saviors of the world. They brought peace on earth. People hailed Caesar as their “Lord and God.” Roman propaganda was filled with images showing the gods on Rome’s side and touting the benefits of Roman rule. Rome boasted of its military power and that it alone could conquer the world and guarantee peace. That propaganda saturated every aspect of life in the ancient world - religious, political, social and economic. It was a vision that many people bought into. Temples for emperor worship were erected in three of the seven cities that John wrote to. Emperor worship was part of the glue that held the Empire together. But, according to John, it was all a lie. Caesar was not the savior of the world. In fact, no one was found worthy to accomplish God’s will and create a better world. Not Caesar! Not anyone!

At this, John describes how he began to weep bitterly. People need hope that somehow the future will be better than the past. They need to believe that someone somewhere is capable of solving their problems and making the world a better place. This is particularly true of people experiencing oppression. But then John says that he heard a loud voice. **“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.”** John dried his tears. That was exactly what he wanted. A lion is a strong and mighty animal, the king of the jungle. A lion could conquer and give victory over enemies. Isn’t that often what people want in a leader? And a Lion of the tribe of Judah reminded John of Israel’s greatest king, David, and pointed to a future coming king, a Messiah. That is very good news!

That was what John heard. But when John turned and looked, what he saw was just the opposite of his expectations. **“Then I saw between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered ...”** If the lion is at the top of the food chain, the lamb is pretty close to the bottom. A lamb is weak, innocent, and defenseless. In fact, the word for lamb that John uses is a diminutive, lamby or lambkin. And if that weren’t enough, this lamb is standing as if it had been slaughtered. It’s as if John wants to give us an image bereft of everything we usually associate with a strong leader. Who is worthy to open the scroll? Who can bring about God’s plan for the redemption of the world? It is NOT the Lion, nor any Caesar or *Führer* – it is the Lamb. And all the host of heaven fell before the Lamb and broke out into a chorus of passionate praise. **“Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!”** How does God choose to change the world and bring about its salvation? It is not through power or coercion or the threat of violence. It is not through anything the world understands or values. God changes the world through love and forgiveness. God changes the world through the courageous and nonviolent stand for truth and justice, even if the cost is suffering and death. John describes the Lamb as having seven horns. A horn was a symbol of power, and seven was a symbol for completeness.

Where does complete power lie? It lies in the lamb that was slaughtered. It is what one author calls, "lamb-power." Lamb-power is the wisdom of God that is foolishness to the world, for God's weakness is stronger than human strength (1 Corinthians 1:25).

Let me take you back to Germany and give you an example of what I mean. In 2010 I led a tour to Germany to visit the sites where Martin Luther had lived. When we drove through Leipzig our guide showed us a large building that had housed the *Stasi*, a nickname for the East German Secret Police. They employed thousands of people all intent on spying on their fellow East Germans to control them and force them into obedience. That is the way the world often works, with fear, coercion and threats of violence. That building is today a museum, a monument to the ways the East German government tried to control the population and maintain its power.

What happened? How did change come? In 1989, the Berlin Wall fell. One of the epicenters for change was the Nikolai Church in Leipzig. While political demonstrations were outlawed, every Monday night at 5:00 the church held a prayer meeting. These prayer meetings became so popular because it was one of the few ways East Germans could meet to express their desire for change. By the summer of 1989, thousands of people were meeting there every week, yearning for a change in their lives and their leaders. That yearning came to a head on October 9. Over 70,000 East German citizens gathered around the Nikolai Church. Hundreds of fully armed police and soldiers had been imported to Leipzig. Hospitals were told to prepare for casualties. The pastor of Nikolai Church was named Christian Führer. That night those who gathered heard the words of Jesus from the Beatitudes. **"Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God."** Jesus' words that day were not a call to arms. His was not a call to battle, but a call to nonviolence, a call to be peacemakers, a call to love enemies and pray for persecutors. Pastor Führer described what happened next:

More than 2,000 people leaving the church were welcomed by tens of thousands waiting outside with candles in their hands. I will never forget this moment. A person needs two hands to carry a candle - one to hold it and the other to protect the flame - so you can't carry sticks or stones at the same time. The miracle happened. Jesus' spirit of nonviolence seized the masses and transformed them into a real and peaceful, powerful presence. Troops and police officers were drawn in and became engaged in conversations. The crowds chanted, "No violence," and the police withdrew.

The Leipzig Communist Security Chief wanted to subdue the rebellion. His police force was well-armed. Soldiers with machine guns stood on top of nearby buildings. But the order to fire was never given. Later on, the Security Chief admitted, "We planned everything. We were prepared for everything, except for candles and prayers." One month later the Wall came down.

How do you change the world? How do you make it a better place? How do you bring about God's reign on the earth? Not with guns and bullets, but with candles and prayers. Not with powerful armies, but with the Word of God. Not with a lion, but with a lamb. Der Führer offered Germany a lion, but Pastor Führer offered them the Lamb that was slain. This is the wisdom of God that is foolishness to the world: that true and lasting change can only come to the world by a Lamb.

Our Lamb, Jesus Christ, loves us, forgives us, and calls us today to follow him in the nonviolent struggle for peace and justice in our world.