

St. Lydia's
Eastertide 3 - May 1
Christian Scharen
Revelation 5: 6-14

A Reading from Revelation

6 Then 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. **7** The Lamb went and took the scroll from the right hand of the One who was seated on the throne. **8** When 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. **9** They 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;
10 you have made them to be a *basileian* and *hiereis* serving our God,
and they will reign on earth.”

11 Then 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, **12** singing 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!”

13 Then 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
forever and ever!”

14 And the four living creatures said, “Amen!” And the elders fell down and worshiped.

I.

Here are some ways into the space I want to explore tonight. If one works for you, take it as your door in. If none work, there are openings with no doors to walk through, by paths you create.

I have been wondering about what it takes—really—to sing a new song. I mean that literally, of course, and figuratively, too.

Once, at an arena in Boston, I heard U2, the Irish rock band, play a concert. I prayed to the Gods of Rock that they would end their show with their song “40”—a gorgeous version of Psalm 40. I mean by last song the last of the encore set, the last song before the lights come up. And they did, first building to a crescendo and then slowly leaving the stage one by one till only Larry Mullen Jr. was left pounding on the drums. Then he too put down his sticks and walked off. The whole crowd swelled together as one, singing “I will sing, sing a new song.” The lights came on, and we filled out, still singing. We twisted down a sterile concrete exit stairs, still singing, as if unwilling to let it go—the moment, and the song, both.

I read poetry in the mornings, along with coffee and knitting. I don’t always understand it, actually. And that’s part of what I love. I so love the interplay of space and letters on the page, along with references I get or don’t, multiplies of meaning and metaphor that poke at me, opening me to fresh experiences. I’m reading Ocean Vuong’s *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* just now, and his poem *Threshold* ends with these words that have been stuck in my eyes, my ears, my soul, now for weeks. I didn’t know the cost of entering a song—was to lose your way back. / So I entered. So I lost. / I lost it all with my eyes / wide open.

Amelia preached back in Lent during our series on the book of Ruth. She shared some about the stories she helped tell of young Ukrainians during the early days of the war. Something about the scrappy everydayness of Ruth, resourceful and faithful, and the relative absence of flashy God moments that somehow too simply resolve things, spoke to her. It felt, if I am recalling it correctly, that for her, too, more often God shows up in everyday ways, in the midst of coping with life—and sometimes very challenging circumstances. In a follow-up with a few of these Ukrainian young people a few weeks ago, Anastasia Mokhina, 24, tells the story of her wedding. She and her husband, both in active service in the military, still managed with the help of friends to take a few hours off, find a cake, a bouquet, rings, and some flowers to decorate a cafe. The battalion commander officiated. They only allowed themselves one glass of champagne; as she put it, “even though it is our wedding, we are still at service.” Here’s their picture returning to their guard posts after the dinner and cake.

II.

At the heart of this text from Revelation 5 is a song, a new song. This new song was no simple thing to arrive at. Just verses before, the narrator, John, weeps bitterly before the One who sits on the throne of heaven who holds a scroll. John weeps because there is no one worthy to open the scroll and break its seals. One feels this weeping taps deeply into the experience of human suffering reaching back to the cries

of the Israelites as slaves in Egypt, crying out to God. One feels it recalls Rachel weeping for her children, refusing to be comforted, in the time of Jeremiah. Or mothers weeping after the rage of King Herod slaughtered the innocents in his blind efforts to destroy Jesus.

Following Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza and other scholars re-reading this historically misunderstood last book in the bible, I fundamentally understand it to be written from “the perspective from below” and expressing the experiences of those who were powerless, poor, and in constant fear” of the oppressive power and violence of the Roman Empire. Because of this social positioning, the writer could not risk direct attacks on the power of Rome, and instead disguised this critique through a symbolic portrait. And it is exactly the Lamb who was slaughtered, that one Jesus of Nazareth killed by Rome on a cross, and given new life in the Spirit, who is worthy, who takes the scroll, opening its cycles of judgement against Rome, against the *basilion* of the earth.

Every single hearer of this passage knows the old song: Rome itself, and its Lord, Caesar, and its temples and priests hold the “power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing.” This old song is so overwhelming, how would one find the capacity to imagine, let alone hear and sing along with, a new song?

And here John recalls the Exodus, the passover lamb and its blood by which Israel was saved, and draws upon a Roman law that says captives enslaved and brought back to Rome after war could be ransomed by a representative from their home country for a price, and brought home. Here, the Lamb who was slaughtered becomes the redeeming payment for saints from every tribe and language and people and nation to become another *basileian* and all made to be *hiereis* —priest/esses—serving—and this is key, NOT Rome, not Caesar, but God, and in the place of the Empire and its power, instead these lowly people of the Lamb will reign on earth.”

III.

Singers and songwriters, poets, writers and journalists, they all help us tell stories of now and of the future that open space for us to imagine what is just outside our peripheral vision, just around the corner of the possibility we currently allow ourselves to imagine. It is no accident that so much of Revelation is written in poetry and song. Protest movements, as we know, have been singing movements. In a 1976 article reflecting on the Civil Rights Movement, Bernice Johnson Reagon remembers that:

The Albany Movement [nonviolent protest in Albany, Georgia, in 1961-62] was already a singing movement and we took the songs to jail. There the songs I had sung because they made me feel good or because they said what I thought about a specific issue did something. I would start a song and everybody would join in. After the song, the differences among us would not be as great. Somehow, making a song required an expression of that which was common to us all. The songs did not feel like the same songs I had sung in college. This music was like an instrument, like holding a tool in your hand.

Our politics is caught up in who we worship, in what we sing. And even Revelation, radical as its vision is, might lead us astray in our worship and song. Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza worries that John's cooption of the metaphorical world of Empire for the description of the Lamb misleads: Jesus eschews thrones and the trappings of royalty and worldly power. His playful ethical spectacle of entering Jerusalem on a donkey, and rejection of Pilate's question, "Are you a King, then?" with the retort, "You say that I am" place such trappings of power strictly out of bounds for the people of the Way who follow the Lamb.

As for all those who sing new songs, for all who risk embracing joy in the midst of horrors, we know that the work is not our own, but that we are gathered together from every tribe and nation to become a new people, to say together: Amen!

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