

**“The Shepherd is the Lamb”**  
**John 10:22-30**  
**Revelation 7:9-17**

In the first part of the 10<sup>th</sup> chapter of John, Jesus identifies himself as “the sheep gate.” **“Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”** Jesus then says, **“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.”**

In today’s reading, we hear frustration on the part of both the religious leaders and Jesus. **“How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly,”** they asked him. Jesus replied, “I’ve been trying to tell you but you won’t believe me; you’re not hearing me, you’re not listening to me.”

In the verses following our reading, the people get ready to stone him for blasphemy, **“because you, though only a human being, are making yourself God.”**

It wasn’t long ago when during a Bible study someone asked me, “With all the good things that Jesus did, why did most of the people reject him?” I think the answer is rather simple – he did not fit the image of what a Messiah should look like.

Sunday morning is the only time during the week when someone who doesn’t know me would identify me as a clergyperson because of my liturgical garb. I never wear a clerical collar. Indeed my week-day attire has become more and more informal. So a couple of weeks ago when calling in one of the local hospitals, I went to the information desk and presented the ticket from the parking garage, asking for validation as a member of the clergy to allow me free parking. The woman looked at me and asked, “Do you have identification?” When I showed her my business card she apologized saying, “I’m sorry, I’m new on the job and I need to play by the rules.” “That’s OK,” I said. “I don’t look like a clergy and I don’t want to look like one!”

Jesus didn’t fit the image of a Messiah and I suspect he didn’t want to look like one, either. Hundreds of years before Jesus lived, the prophet Isaiah wrote about a suffering servant. Exactly who Isaiah had in mind is up for constant debate. Knowing what we do about Jesus, however, we can’t help but make the connection. **“The servant grew up before God — a scrawny seedling, a scrubby plant in a parched field. There was nothing attractive about him, nothing to cause us to take a second look. He was looked down on and passed over, a man who suffered, who knew pain firsthand. One look at him and people turned away. We looked down on him, thought he was scum.”**<sup>1</sup>

Jesus didn’t fit the image. It really isn’t just because of his physical appearance and the fact that he didn’t wear a jacket and tie during weekdays. It really isn’t just about his humble origin, though that was a stumbling block on occasion. **“Isn’t this Joseph’s son, the one we’ve known since he was a youngster?”**<sup>2</sup>

Jesus didn’t fit the image. The people, even his disciples, didn’t hear him because of his *modus operandi*, that is, his way of saving. Remember this passage immediately following Peter’s great confession that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the living God? **“[Jesus] then began explaining**

**things to them: ‘It is necessary that the Son of Man proceed to an ordeal of suffering, be tried and found guilty by the elders, high priests, and religion scholars, be killed, and after three days rise up alive.’ He said this simply and clearly so they couldn't miss it. But Peter grabbed him in protest. Turning and seeing his disciples wavering, wondering what to believe, Jesus confronted Peter. ‘Peter, get out of my way! Satan, get lost! You have no idea how God works.’”**

“He said this simply and clearly so they couldn't miss it.” Perhaps that’s a good segue to our second reading. The Revelation to St. John is the very opposite of something said “simply and clearly so we can’t miss it.” I always miss the point, except in the broadest of terms. The images and symbolism require one to carry a field guide to follow as you read. I don’t know how many times I’ve told Bible study groups that I think the world would be better off had the Book of Revelation not made it into the sacred canon of scripture. Of course, it is in the Bible, therefore I would never say such a thing from the pulpit!

I do have some good company. Martin Luther said it is “neither apostolic nor prophetic. My spirit cannot accommodate itself to this book. I stick to the books which present Christ to me clearly and purely.” John Calvin wrote commentaries on every book in the New Testament *except* Revelation. Eastern Orthodox Christians never read it in their liturgy.<sup>3</sup> The lectionary that most churches use today include excerpts from Revelation only 9 times, out of 468 Bible readings suggested for a three-year cycle. That’s less than 2%. My own preaching would be even less.

I’m not boasting. I’m not proud. Quite the contrary. The church’s reluctance to teach and preach Revelation has left this mysterious and oft-times frightening book to those who interpret it in ways for which it was not intended. In short, it does not predict future events and the end of the world. It was written to give hope and encouragement to Christians who live under Roman oppression during the last years of the first century. The beast is Rome. The end of the age is the fall of the Roman Empire. That’s not the same as the end of the world.

It’s reading Revelation as a predictor of future events, namely the end of the world, that inspires the *Left Behind* series of novels whose bizarre and frightening images leave many readers confused who can’t separate fact from fiction. Even more scary are those who see the war in Iraq and the continuing Israeli / Palestinian conflict as a foreshadowing of “the end” and who are all too willing to help things along, even to precipitate Armageddon. Christian Zionism is a militant movement that sees Israel as a player in the Christian end-times drama and yet, in the end, there is no place for Jews unless they become Christians. Jesus, in this drama, is a man’s man who leads the charge to punish his enemies the way a real man would.

In a society filled with such violence as is ours, if not on the street outside the door, then on the TV screen or in the video games that mesmerize our children, no wonder such a reading of Revelation is popular. (There is even a series of *Left Behind* video games.)

Barbara Rossing teaches New Testament at the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago. Her recent book, *The Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation*, has been receiving a lot of attention because, I believe, there is such a thirst for sanity in interpreting the Revelation. She writes,

In place of healing, the Rapture proclaims escape. In place of Jesus’ blessing of

peacemaking, the Rapture voyeuristically glorifies violence and war. This theology is not biblical. We are not Raptured off the earth, nor is God. No, God has come to live in the world through Jesus. God created the world, God loves the world, and God will never leave the world behind.<sup>4</sup>

One of the most helpful things that Rossing does is to contrast the image of who Jesus actually is with the image of Jesus that many want – the conquering hero who loves his people and condemns all the rest. In Revelation 5, John is looking for someone worthy enough to open the scroll and break its seals. One of the elders says to him, **“Do not weep. See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah ... has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals.”**<sup>5</sup> When John looked again, he saw **“a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered ... He went and took the scroll from the right hand of the one who was seated on the throne.”** When he did that, everyone sang 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; you have made them to be a kingdom and priests serving our God, and they will reign on earth.”**<sup>6</sup>

Again in today’s passage from chapter 7, we hear of that countless multitude who have come through a time of suffering. They were not raptured out of the world to save them from trials, they had to endure them. How did they make it through? By their faith and faithfulness; by trusting the Good Shepherd. **“They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them. They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”**<sup>7</sup>

The Lamb at the center of the throne is our shepherd, the Lamb – not a lion, not a Sylvester Stallone-type character, not even a border collie, but a Lamb – one who shared life with us in every respect and who “suffered, was crucified, died and was buried” because he responded to hatred with love; to evil with goodness.

That’s a “wimpy Jesus” chided one of Rossing’s critics from the extreme right wing. “We need the judgmental, warrior Jesus,” he added.<sup>8</sup> But that is precisely the Jesus we meet in the Bible. Rossing talks about “lamb power” and it doesn’t sound wimpy to me.

We are to conquer, but not with violence – just as Jesus conquers by being slain, not by killing anyone. At the very heart of God is a slain Lamb, and lamb power is the wonder - working power of God’s vulnerable nonviolent love to change the world. It is exactly this power that rapture theology finds insufficient ... [They] preach the saving power of the blood of the Lamb in Jesus’ crucifixion, but it’s not enough power. They need Christ to come back with some real power, not as a lamb but as a roaring lion, to finish the job of conquering.<sup>9</sup>

People did not believe Jesus. He was rejected because he didn’t fit the image as to what a Messiah should be like. It’s hard to accept a suffering Lamb. Humankind has no frame of reference for it. We don’t know how to deal with it. The only thing we know is to fight violence with more violence, fire with fire, evil with evil. In the wake of the carnage at Virginia Tech, some have seriously suggested that the answer to all such violence is more, not fewer, guns. “If the students

were allowed to carry guns, this could have been avoided,” goes the argument. Such thinking shouldn’t be surprising. It’s a microcosm of the arms race that has plagued international politics for generations. That’s just how sick we are. We cannot help ourselves. We need a savior.

Speaking of sickness, we often hear about religious extremists wrapping themselves up in a bomb and considering themselves as martyrs for their cause. They are not martyrs, they are murderers. A martyr never spills another person’s blood, but allows his own blood to be spilled if necessary while working for a cause. Four days before his death, Martin Luther King Jr. cried,

Thank God for John, who heard a voice saying, ‘Behold I make all things new – former things are passed away.’ God grant that we may be participants in this newness ... If we will but do it, we will bring about a new day of justice and brotherhood and peace. And that day the morning stars will sing together and the [children] of God will shout for joy.<sup>10</sup>

Let me say it “simply and clearly” so you don’t miss the point. Our Shepherd is a Lamb. Only the Lamb can save us. As Easter people we say we believe that Jesus was raised from the dead. It’s not only the person of Jesus that is victorious on Easter, it is his *way* of saving, his *way* of being Messiah, that is vindicated. His way is victorious. By his death on the cross, **“Jesus disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it.”**<sup>11</sup> In short, his *way* is truth and life.<sup>12</sup>

*Give we the glory and praise to the Lamb;  
Take we the robe and the harp and the palm;  
Sing we the song of the Lamb that was slain,  
Dying in weakness but rising to reign.*<sup>13</sup>

## Endnotes

1. Isaiah 53:2-3 (*The Message*)
2. Luke 4:22 (*The Message*)
3. Dan Clendenin, <http://www.journeywithjesus.net/Essays/20070423JJ.shtml>
4. Quoted by Bill Berkowitz in [www.WorkingForChange.com](http://www.WorkingForChange.com)
5. Revelation 5.5
6. Revelation 5:9-10
7. Revelation 7:15-17
8. In an interview with Morley Safer on CBS' *60 Minutes*, see Berkowitz note above
9. In an interview with *The Wittenburg Door*, Issue #202, November / December 2005
10. Sermon delivered at the National Cathedral, Washington, D.C., on March 31, 1968. Congressional Record, *9 April 1968*.
11. Colossians 2:15
12. See John 14:6
13. Horatius Bonar, 1866; *Blessing and Honor*, #147 Presbyterian Hymnal