

People Without Life Support
Psalm 23
Revelation 5:1-12, 7:9-17
April 25, 2010
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Today we'll be talking about a promise that comes to us in a vision. "The Lamb...will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life..." (Rev. 7:17). Here is the promise of Revelation.

It is a promise that comes also from the Psalms. Psalm 23, "The Lord is my shepherd," is sung by someone who has everything he needs. This person has every resource to make life complete.

The Hebrew Bible (the Old Testament) is full of images of God the provider. In the New Testament, Jesus shows how we are to act in response to God's providence, in fact, how we are to be the shepherds and providers for one another.

The Book of Revelation is a vision of God's perfect world, where all are provided for. Revelation is an apocalypse, that is, "a book that records visual and auditory revelations of a seer [who is] in an ecstatic state." It is "about the future or the heavenly world" (Duling, *The New Testament: History, Literature, and Social Context*, p. 571). An apocalypse is believed to come from beyond this world, like a dream, or in this case, we would say, as a vision.

Scholars believe Revelation was written at the end of the first century by a man called John of Patmos. It probably was not the same man as John, the disciple of Jesus, nor John the evangelist, who is thought to have written the Gospel of John and the letters of John. What we know about this John is that he recorded this vision on the island of Patmos in the Aegean Sea, at a time of persecution by Rome. The first known persecutions of the Christians were during the reign of Nero. (In the year 64 there was a terrible fire that destroyed a quarter of Rome, thought to be set by the emperor himself, but Nero blamed it on a scapegoat, the early Christians.) When Domitian became emperor, he expanded the persecution to the Christians in Asia. It would have been at this time that John, an early Christian, was exiled to the Island of Patmos off the coast of Asia Minor (Turkey, today), where he wrote the Book of Revelation around the year 95 of the Common Era. Roman soldiers demanded that people in the empire acknowledge the gods of the Roman pantheon. If the early Christians refused, they were liable to banishment, torture, or execution. We believe John was banished to Patmos due to his belief in one God and in Jesus, the Son of God.

It makes sense that this apocalyptic vision was revealed to John of Patmos at a time of persecution. It is in times of oppression and fear that people yearn for hope. John understood Jesus as the savior who came to bring to the world the hope that was so needed. He understood Jesus as a martyr, who died for his love of God and humanity. The thought of martyrdom was heavy on the hearts of John and his fellow Christians because of

the threat by the Romans. Revelation offered salvation to all who were oppressed and encouragement to martyrs

For John of Patmos, salvation comes from Jesus, “the Lamb that was slain.” We’ve heard this phrase so many times; I wonder if we even know what it means. The idea is that Jesus died without sin, like an animal, say a goat, that would have been formerly let go by the Hebrew people during Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, with all the sins on its head, in order that the people might have forgiveness of their sins. (This is where we get the word “scapegoat.”) So we have in our text today and in the text of Händel’s *Messiah*: “Worthy is the Lamb, that was slain and hath redeemed us to God by His blood, to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honour and glory, and blessing” (*Messiah*). In John’s vision, Christ, the Lamb of God, is “worthy” to take the scroll with its seven seals and to break the seals and read the scroll. This scroll was to give hope to seven churches in Asia Minor where the people feared persecution by the Romans. This statement of praise for God—really a doxology—is right in the midst of political unrest.

In John’s vision, people come in dressed in white, and one of the elders in the vision asks, “Who are these robed in white, and where have they come from?” The answer is: “These are they who have come out of the great ordeal” (Rev. 7:13-14).

Today we have many people, right here in Rohnert Park, “who have come out of the great ordeal.” They are the people living on the edge. They are the people who are homeless, or recently homeless. They are the people who do not have the resources to pay all their bills or get childcare or health insurance. They do not have a support system to carry them through hard times. They may not speak the language of the mainstream culture. They may be illiterate. They may have problems, like addiction, physical or mental illness, lack of job skills, lack of connection—in short, they may be people without life support.

Helen Gilstrap has been volunteering to work with people such as these, who have come out of “the great ordeal.” She volunteers through COTS, Committee on the Shelterless. She has offered to share her experience today.

A Witness on Work with the Committee on the Shelterless

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is a promise that even in poverty there is still hope. This promise is a lifeline to those who find themselves without life support.

Today many progressive Christians have trouble with traditional atonement theology with emphasis on our sins being forgiven by the blood of the lamb. Many of our traditional hymns use that language, and you can see where it comes from in the Book of Revelation. Many Christians today prefer to think of Jesus as the teacher who preached the coming of the Kingdom of heaven, a better day, the coming of a time when all people would live in health and wholeness. Many prefer to believe that Jesus’ death was not a once-and-for-all washing white from the blood of the lamb, but that Jesus’ suffering continues whenever people are in need, whenever we allow other people to live without life support (Stanley Hauerwas, <http://www.beliefnet.com/Faiths/Christianity/2005/03/Why-Have-You-Forsaken-Me.aspx>).

A traditional theory of atonement says that Jesus died as a substitute for sinners, and that his death erases all our sins. Another theory of atonement says that the sins of the world will always be with us, unless we take up the cross and share our resources with those who are without. Wesleyan theology says that God calls us to respond to the love of Christ by our acts of compassion. *We* become God's shepherds and provide for the needs of our brothers and sisters.

Then we will see a world where people hunger and thirst no more, where people have shelter and human guides—partners like you and me—who bring comfort and the needed resources that make life good. This is the vision of Shalom.