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Scripture: Revelation 5:1-14
"Settling In: Worshiping the Lamb"
Preached at Trinity CRC on 9/24/2017

Good morning.

We are in the middle of a mini-series on Settling In.

To help us stay rooted in the chaos of the changing season...

We're looking at a few sections of Scripture: past, present and future.

We started in the Old Testament.

We looked at Psalm 78;

How Israel's story of redemption foreshadowed our story of redemption in Christ.

Last week we moved on to the Gospels.

We looked at the Gospel of John and what it means to make our home with Christ.

We heard that Christ has taken the initiative to make his home with us...

And he invites us to make our home with him.

This week we are moving on to a new genre of Scripture:

Apocalyptic.

Who here is intimidated by the content of the book of Revelation?

I used to avoid the whole book altogether...

Claiming some sort of holy reverence.

In reality I was just confused and perplexed by the things I read.

It is not an easy book to understand...

Especially with some of the teaching on Revelation today.

I was at a church recently and after the service a woman came up to talk with me.

She had a Bible in her hand and turned to the book of Revelation.

She started reading from chapter 12 about the woman and the Dragon and the stars.

She started telling me about how the constellations pointed to God's judgment of the world now.

How things will get worse on September 23rd.

And she knew this because of Revelation...

And because she was following the teaching of a church in Australia.

Or there's the once-popular *Left Behind* novel and movies.

Where Christians are instantly raptured;

Nothing left but a pile of clothes.

I think most of us laugh at this and see it for what it is,

But the truth is that this thinking has had an impact on us.

Revelation is futuristic;

It's scary.

It's weird.

And we want to avoid it.

Well lucky for you, I'm new enough in the ministry—

And naïve enough—

to think that preaching a sermon on Revelation is a wise thing.

I want to first admit my lack.

Revelation is a difficult book to read,

And I don't claim to have all of the answers.

I feel inadequate to preach a sermon on it, but by God's strength here we go.

Before we read our passage today I want to say a few things about the book in general.

A few things to help get us started.

First, Revelation is a book of the Bible just like the Psalms, the Gospels, Romans and all of our other favorites.

It deserves our attention because it is a part of our New Testament.

God uses his Word to reveal himself to us.

In the Scriptures the story of God's love for us is revealed.

The same holds for Revelation.

Second, we need to view the book of Revelation like every other book of the Bible.

It was written by a real person to real people living in their own culture...

Written usually to encourage a specific group of believers.

If we want to understand what Revelation says to us...

We need to understand first what it said to the original recipients of the letter.

Third, we need to see Revelation in its genre.

It is apocalyptic literature.

It is an unveiling...in this case by Jesus Christ (Rev 1:1)

Certain sections of the Old Testament, and even the Gospels are apocalyptic.

They disclose information about what's to come...

Usually they use symbolic language to tell us things from a transcendent perspective.

Prophets receive a message from God that is addressed to the people...

Communicating God's reality in *their* time and place.

They use symbols to help their readers see spiritual realities more clearly.

Usually the symbols have a certain shock value to grab attention.

They are saying: "Hey, listen to this!"

"Watch me!"

So I want you to try to see John—

The author of Revelation—

As you would view an Old Testament prophet.

In fact Revelation is packed with images and echoes of the Old Testament.

Comb through Isaiah, Daniel, Ezekiel, and Zechariah when you get the chance to see where Revelation gets a lot of its images and symbols.

John is trying to grab the attention of his readers by using symbolic language.

Communicating a message from God that has to do with *their* present situation.

And this morning we're going to be asking:

"What is John trying to communicate to his readers?"

And "how does that shape us today?"

I invite you to turn in your bibles to page 1918.

Revelation 5:1-14.

People of God, hear the Word of the Lord.

Then I saw in the right hand of him who sat on the throne a scroll with writing on both sides and sealed with seven seals. ²And I saw a mighty angel proclaiming in a loud voice, "Who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll?" ³But no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth could open the scroll or even look inside it. ⁴I wept and wept because no one was found who was worthy to open the scroll or look inside. ⁵Then one of the elders said to me, "Do not weep! See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals."

⁶Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing at the center of the throne, encircled by the four living creatures and the elders. The Lamb had seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. ⁷He went and took the scroll from the right hand of him who sat on the throne. ⁸And when he had taken it, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb. Each one had a harp and they were holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of God's people. ⁹And they sang a new song, saying:

"You are worthy to take the scroll
and to open its seals,
because you were slain,
and with your blood you purchased for God
persons from every tribe and language and people and nation.

¹⁰You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God,
and they will reign on the earth."

¹¹Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders. ¹²In a loud voice they were saying:

"Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain,
to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength
and honor and glory and praise!"

¹³Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, saying:

“To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb
 be praise and honor and glory and power,
 for ever and ever!”

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

The Word of the Lord (**Thanks be to God**).

From the first few chapters of Revelation we learn that this is a letter.

Remember, John is a *real* person writing to *real* people, experiencing *real* life.

John is writing a letter to seven churches late in the 1st century in the province of Asia Minor...

What is now present-day Turkey.

And the Christians there were experiencing some problems.

They lived in a time when allegiance to the emperor was important.

People were expected to honor the emperor for bringing peace and prosperity.

He was thought of as a semi-god.

Sure, people were allowed to worship other gods...

As long as they paid homage to the Roman Emperor.

Those that didn't venerate the emperor were seen as defectors and a threat to the empire.

There was even localized persecution of Christians recorded in some areas of the empire.

So there were the Christians...

Christ was crucified decades before...

The first generation of apostles were dying off...

And the Christians were being forced into making decisions...

Decisions that shaped and determined their identity.

“What are we to do at a time such as this?”

“Do we pledge allegiance to the emperor and renounce Christ?”

“Do we pretend to venerate the emperor?”

“Do we fight back?”

Some of the churches in the area were enduring hardships faithfully;

Persevering under oppression;

And some were not.

Some were luke-warm in their faith and others leaving their first love.

So John has this throne-room vision...

There is one seated on the throne.

Around the throne are 4 living creatures with wings and eyes and faces of different animals.

Encircling the throne are 24 other thrones with elders sitting on them:

This is where we're at in our passage today...

John is in this majestic throne room.

And an angel asks for someone worthy to open the scroll in God's right hand.

We read that John “wept and wept because no one was found worthy to open the scroll.”

No one was able to open the scroll and reveal or enact God's will.

Not the elders, emperor, not the martyrs, not John himself.

I'm reminded of those dreams I'll have on rare occasions where for some reason I cannot stop crying.

Just uncontrollable sobbing.

This is what I envision for John:

Uncontrollable crying at this picture of despair and lack of hope...

No one to come in and exercise God's plan.

Probably what some of us are feeling right now with everything going on:

Fires, hurricanes, earthquakes, and floods.

Famine in East Africa.

Cholera outbreaks in Yemen.

Threats of war being exchanged between Donald Trump and Kim Jong Un.

Terrorist attacks.

Climate change.

Millions of refugees and people displaced from their homes.

“How long O Lord?!”

We need comfort in this life...

We need hope in our day to day.

Not only to cope with the chaos of the world,

But with the chaos of our lives.

How do we manage from day to day?

Where do we find our hope?

When family members get sick...

When money gets tight...

When we feel mistreated at work or at home...

When we're unhappy with local politics...

When we're just plain confused and fed up with life...

Where do we go for comfort?

There are plenty of places we instinctively turn:

Shopping makes some of us feel better.

For others it's working more.

For some, video games are our way to disconnect from all that's going on.

TV.

Cruising the internet.

Joining in on the banter.

Doing those things where we feel like we have control over something.

The world is out of control so we grasp for it in many shapes and forms.

Sometimes our comforts are more destructive:

Alcohol.

Pornography.

Overeating.

Taking our aggressions out on those closest to us.
Or just living a bitter life.

We weep with John thinking *there is no* hope.

That there is no one to reveal and carry out God's will and promises.

But as we read there is *one*.

One worthy to take the scroll from the right hand of the one seated on the throne.

This is the one that's been pointed to in the Old Testament.

"The Lion of the tribe of Judah" from the book of Genesis (Gen 49).

"The Root of David" from the book of Isaiah (Isa 11).

The Mighty One promised from God.

He is the only one worthy and able to carry out the plans of Almighty God.

The Christians in these 1st century Western Asian churches are given this hope.

John is saying to them, "Look! and See! people of God!"

"God is still on the throne."

"God is still in control."

"The one that you've been following..."

The one no longer physically present with us..."

"He is still sovereign."

"He is still in control."

"You may think that the emperor is in control of things."

"You may be tempted to bow yourselves before the emperor and offer him your worship..."

"Because it seems like *he* is in control and you want to save your lives."

"But look here!"

"The fierce Lion of the Tribe of Judah;"

"The long awaited descendent of David;"

"He has conquered..."

And he is the one worthy to enact the plans of God."

So John looks, and what does he see?

A Lamb.

A lamb looking as if it had been slain.

Theologian Eugene Boring calls this the “most mind-wrenching ‘rebirth of images’ in literature.”

We are expecting to see the Lion of Judah...

Fierce and victorious as only a lion can be...

We instead find a lamb.

Don't let this get lost on you because we're so familiar with Christ as the Lamb of God.

John uses this title for Christ 28 times in Revelation...

But this is his first time.

This is the dramatic entrance of the Lamb.

It's meant to shock the readers.

We expect to see a Lion...

But we see a Lamb.

A slaughtered lamb.

And we understand this to be a symbol of the crucified messiah.

Hung on a tree for the sins of the people.

Eugene Boring says that “crucifixion is the definitive act which stamps its character on the identity of the Christ, and is thus definitive for the identity of God.”

Christ is worthy to take the scroll...

Worthy to carry out God's plan for the world...

Because he was slain...

Because this lamb was butchered.

Christ conquered through sacrifice.

And it was out of this sacrifice that a new people was formed.

“With his blood, Jesus purchased people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation.” (Rev 5:9)

Christ is victorious in this world.

In our past...

In our present...

And in our future...

We are encouraged to persevere in the faith because Christ has already overcome.

He has already conquered.

Why would you throw in the towel when the victory is already ours through Christ?

Christ conquered through sacrifice.

It is counter-intuitive to us.

It is hard to wrap our minds around.

It just doesn't make sense.

But we are called to walk as the Lamb walked.

Our calling and our mission is found in the identity of the Lamb...

As one who conquered through sacrifice.

Not by the force of the Lion, but by the humility and sacrifice of the Lamb.

When we are tempted to follow the ways of the world by:

Winning at all costs.

Making sure people know how much we've done.

Always being right.

Forcing people to be like us.

Finding comfort in those seemingly innocent vices.

When we are tempted to despair because of the condition of the world...

We are given a message of hope;

And an encouragement to persevere.

People of God in this passage we see one of the most beautiful images in all Scripture.

In the center of John's vision...

In the midst of the throne is the Lamb.

And around the Lamb 24 elders and the 4 creatures have fallen to the ground...

Prostrate before the Lamb...

And thousands upon thousands of angels...

Ten thousand times ten thousand...

All singing in a loud voice...

“Worthy is the Lamb who was slain!

To receive power, and wealth, and wisdom, and strength, and honor and glory and praise!”

And then every creature known to humanity:

In heaven and on earth and under the sea and on the sea...

People, birds, horses, swans, turtles, fish, spiders...

All singing praises to the Lamb who is worthy.

Singing praises to the Lamb who conquered through sacrifice.

To the Lamb who gave up his life.

All worship is directed towards the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb.

This is our God.

The God we worship.

The God we encounter every time we come into this place.

The God who calls us and loves us.

The power and might are his.

May we worship him with our lives.

May we follow his path of laying down our lives for the sake of others.

Amen.

I'd like to invite the worship leaders back up.

We're going to join in with this grand chorus and offer our praises to God by singing another round of Agnus Dei.