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Emanuel Episcopal Church
Middleburg, Virginia

The Fifth Sunday of Easter, Year C.
8:00 a.m. and 10:30 a.m.
May 18, 2025

"What a Revelation!"

I want to begin today with a question. What is your favorite book of the Bible? I will start so that you have time to think. My favorite book is Genesis. I love the variety of stories, the quirky people, and the way the narrative develops in fits and starts. I am fascinated by the pastiche of stories, including creation, flood, and the Tower of Babel. Then there are the family stories, Adam and Eve, Abram and Sarai, Isaac and Rebekah, and Jacob, Rachel, and Leah. Then there are all their misbehaving and sometimes violent children. How about the travel from Ur to Canaan, to Egypt, back to Canaan, back to Ur, and on to Egypt again? For people who traveled most everywhere on foot they sure did get around. It is an exciting adventure and throughout the characters are trying to sustain a relationship with God.

Now, what are your favorites? Just shout them out. [Listen for Revelation just in case.] That is quite a collection. I know we did not get all the books of the Bible, but one that even in a large church would probably be missing from the list of favorites is the Book of Revelation. I daresay there are very few people other than scholars who would name that as their favorite. Why do you think that is? Help me out here. What is so off-putting about Revelation? [listen for dragons, wars, cataclysms, visions, four horsemen of the Apocalypse, …] I absolutely understand the reasons you offer. Revelation has dark imagery that can keep us up at night.

However, over the last few weeks, we have heard passages from Revelation that go against these stereotypes. The passages are full of praise, promise, and healing. Going back three Sundays, we heard John of Patmos say in the introduction to Revelation, "Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come …To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever."[1] There is no premonition of violence and celestial warfare here. It is a greeting of forgiveness, peace, love, praise, and eternal promise.

Two Sundays ago, we heard the narrator say, "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, singing with full voice, 'Worthy is the Lamb that was slain'"[2] This is a joyful image of the new heaven where all are praising God and the Lamb, which is Jesus, for their goodness and lovingkindness to all whom they have made.

Last week, we once again encountered multitudes thanking and praising God because through God and the Lamb, they had received salvation. Along with Angels, elders, and the four living creatures, they sing, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom/and thanksgiving and honor/and power and might/be to our God forever and ever! Amen."[3] Some may fear that heaven will be boring, but this sounds like a Billy Graham crusade amped up to eleven. We might get tired, but we will never be bored.

As that passage goes on, an elder reveals that the people who are praising God are "they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and

[1] Revelation 4:5-6 NRSV
[2] Revelation 5:11
[3] Revelation 7:12 NRSVUE

made them white in the blood of the Lamb."[4] Those who came out of the great ordeal are us. We who have been faithful to God and the Lamb gather in praise and thanks to God for our salvation. But there is so much more. "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." Having survived the ordeal of life in faithfulness, we are no longer subjected to the difficulties of life. We are no longer hungry or thirsty; we are protected from the sun and heat because it is the Lamb who is our shepherd.

The poetic imagery here turns common metaphors on their heads. They make us think deeply about what God's salvation means. The robes were not made white by bleach but by being washed in the blood of the Lamb. Think on the power of Jesus' blood to purify and wash away sins. Or that Jesus the Lamb, who was slain, is now the shepherd of the people. The Lamb is no longer to be shepherded but is to be the Good Shepherd.

There is one verse in that passage that is repeated in today's reading. I find it powerful because of its maternal tenderness. It reads "and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."[5] Someone asked me recently why I sometimes use the word mother to describe God. Here is one example. Is this not the action of a mother? Fathers may do this as well, but it is a mother that I see kneeling down and drying a crying child's eyes. God is mother and father of all because all is contained in God. God is tenderness, love, care, and compassion. God is also creator, provider, and protector. Revelation tells us God will come to each of us to wipe away the tears of our lives.

A teacher of mine told a story about a young woman he had in a class. During one school year, she endured the tragic death of her parents. In the aftermath, she became isolated and withdrawn. Where before she had been active and vocal in class, she was now silent. The day they studied this passage, the now silent student surprised everyone with a softly spoken question. It was so softly spoken that the professor had to ask her to repeat it. She asked, "Will God dry old tears or only new tears?" It makes my heart clench knowing this girl was finding hope after her tragedy, because she began to realize it was possible that God would comfort her deep pain.

Because that line is so powerful, John of Patmos wrote about it again in this week's reading from Revelation. Whereas in the previous passage, these promises of comfort and compassion are placed upon the ones who had survived the ordeal, now mortals on earth are given the same promise. They hear:

> "See, the home of God is among mortals.
> He will dwell with them as their God;
> they will be his peoples,
> and God himself will be with them;
> he will wipe every tear from their eyes.
> Death will be no more;

[4] Revelation 7:14b
[5] Revelation 7:17 NRSV

mourning and crying and pain will be no more,
for the first things have passed away."[6]

The first things are passing away, and a new world is being created where God will once again dwell among humanity, just as God did in the Garden of Eden. The promises made to the survivors of the ordeal are brought to mortals. No more death, no more crying, and no more pain. All is forgiven, and all suffering is ended. All tears are wiped away by the hand of God.

For all that may terrify us in the Book of Revelation, there is also the promise of new life in heaven and on earth. There is the promise of consolation, comfort, and care given directly by the hand of God. There is the Lamb who was slaughtered who is now the shepherd who brings us to fresh water, shade, and food. That is the promise that will be fulfilled by God and the Lamb. These passages ought to make us reconsider which book of the Bible is our favorite. Nowhere but in the Book of Revelation do we find such profound beauty, comfort, and tenderness.

[6] Revelation 21:3-4 NRSV