

**Davidson College Presbyterian Church**  
**Davidson, North Carolina**  
**Lib McGregor Simmons**  
**“The Heavenly Journey Begins”**  
**Revelation 4-5**  
**7th Sunday after Pentecost**  
**July 3, 2016**

Today is our third look at Revelation this summer. If you were here on either or both of the first two Sundays when we were in chapters 1-3, you may remember that in those chapters, Pastor John is on the island of Patmos where Christ comes to him in a vision. We now come to chapters 4 and 5, and in these chapters Christ has returned to heaven. He invites Pastor John to “come up here” and join him by way of a spiritual journey.

It is my opinion alone, but I have found that because of the vivid, symbolic, visionary language of these chapters, the absolutely best way to receive these chapters as God’s word is to close your eyes so that the back of your eyelids become the screen upon which the colorful and intense images are projected.

You won’t often hear a preacher say, “Close your eyes,” as he or she begins a sermon, so you may want to take advantage of it.

The lyrics to *America, the Beautiful* which we sang as today’s response of praise were written by Katherine Lee Bates. Katherine Lee Bates was a professor of English at Wellesley. In 1893, when she was 33 years old, she went on a trip. She boarded a train to travel from New England to teach a summer school course at Colorado College. On that memorable journey, she stopped to take in the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago where its alabaster buildings presaged a glorious future for the United States of America. She glimpsed the golden wheat fields of Kansas. She drank in the majestic view of the Great Plains from high atop Pike’s Peak, and it was there, in fact, that the words of the poem that became *America, the Beautiful* began to take shape.

As it happened, the music to which Katherine Lee Bates’ poem was ultimately paired came about in a journey too. Samuel Ward was on a ferryboat trip from Coney Island back to his home in New York City on a summer day in 1882. It is said that he was so inspired by the view that he asked a fellow passenger if he could borrow his shirt cuff on which to write the tune. Originally the music was a hymn, *O Mother Dear, Jerusalem*, hence, the name of the hymn tune MATERNA. Bates’s poem and Ward’s hymn tune were joined together in 1912, and that is the way that we have sung it ever since.

Taking a journey in the manner of Katherine Lee Bates, Samuel Ward, or any of us who has ever boarded a plane in Charlotte that was headed to the West Coast and laid aside the laptop and just looked down and marveled at the landscape of the United States of America as you glided above it at 40,000 feet, can be a spiritual experience and give you a new perspective on one’s life’s reality.

Such is also the case in Revelation.

In Revelation, Pastor John is the tour guide for his readers’ visionary journey. We’re at the point of embarkation today, God’s throne room. Any first-century reader of Revelation would have recognized the comparison to the Oval Office of the Roman Empire, the throne room of Caesar himself. And any first-century reader schooled in Jewish tradition also would have recognized the plethora of allusions to images from the Hebrew Scriptures.

Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza has said that “the central theological question of chapters 4-5 as well as of the whole church is: Who is the true Lord of this world?” (1)

Pastor John answers the question by piling image upon image. He reminds me a little bit of those shoppers that you see rushing into the department stores when the doors open and the holiday sales begin. He grabs some images from the Roman Empire; he snaps up some images from the Hebrew Scriptures. When you read Revelation from our vantage point in 2016, it can seem a little crazy really.

But there actually is a lot of method in Pastor John’s mad vision.

Let’s unpack some of the images.

In the emperor’s throne room in Rome, people sang hymns of allegiance and threw their crowns before Caesar as a sign of their loyalty. When Pastor John uses the images of elders casting their crowns before God’s throne in verse 10, he is reminding us that only God, and no political leader, in the first century or now, is worthy of our worship.

When Pastor John writes about a throne decorated with jewels and surrounded by living creatures full of eyes, he is hearkening back to the apocalyptic images found in the Old Testament book of Ezekiel and calling them to remember that God has never abandoned them, not even in the darkest of times.

And then there are all the numbers. There is the number 7. Remember that God created the world in 6 days and rested on the 7<sup>th</sup>. From Genesis 1 forward, the number 7 represents wholeness, completeness. And what in the world might the number 24 represent? Nobody knows actually. Scholars have been known to skip lunch at their conventions debating the matter. Maybe it is the total of the 12 tribes of Israel and the 12 apostles. Maybe it is the 24 star gods of the Babylonian zodiac. Maybe it is the 24 hours of the day and thus the fullness of time which should be spent praising God. In the end, what we can say that the symbolism is all about wholeness and how humanity is to orient itself in faithful response before God. (2)

And finally there is perhaps the most important point of all that is gathered up in the image of the Lamb.

In the midst of worship around the throne of God in heaven, a setback threatens to derail everything. God is holding a scroll that must be opened, but no one is worthy to break open the seals on the scroll. Pastor John weeps.

One of the elders tells John not to weep because “The Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals.” The words “lion” and “conquer” lead readers to expect a fierce animal to appear to open the scroll, an animal like the conquering lions who smacked their lips in eager anticipation when gladiators and Christians were on the dinner menu in the arena in that first century day.

Yet Revelation delivers a surprise. In place of the lion we expect comes a Lamb. The Greek word is actually a diminutive. It is a teeny, tiny, baby lamb who is on the throne, and this teeny, tiny, baby lamb is standing as if it had been slaughtered. This is a depiction of the Jesus in the most vulnerable way possible, as a powerless victim who has been killed, but who is standing upright, crucified yet risen to new life. (3)

The Lamb who is the Christ still bears the scars of pain and suffering and death. Those scars never go away. But in the end the Lamb and we who follow in his way embody the truth: Love wins.

We have been reminded yet again this week by the terrorism in Turkey and in Bangladesh and earlier this morning in Baghdad that life is precious and not one of us knows the length of our days and evil brings terror and random destruction (4) In the face of such as this, it is tempting to answer Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza’s question, Who is the true Lord of this world?, with a shrug of our shoulders and an arch of our eyebrows and a shake of our heads. It is tempting to get discouraged and thus seduced by our own longings for security and safety that we tumble down into bad habits of disrespecting our neighbors and sabotaging each other for the sake of power.

But Pastor John’s vision urges us to hang on and join hands with the Revelation elders and to keep on worshipping and singing and loving in defiance of evil and in praise of the one who was killed and still stands and the One who sits on the throne for the sake of us all.

Five summers ago, I had the privilege of travelling to Kenya, a country which has suffered more than its share of violence, with others from DCPC – Peggy Kimbirl, Molly Goode, Jeremy Hall, Hannah Clark, and Gordon Clark. We had a layover in Ataturk Airport in Istanbul. This past week I emailed Gordon Clark asking him if he could locate any pictures of our group in the airport, thinking that I would show it on the screen during this morning’s 10:30 service. It is no accident, I think, that he couldn’t find a picture of us in the airport, but that he did send a picture of the six of us from DCPC singing and dancing with what looks to me like about 24 children singing and dancing and worshipping with us in front of the Sigona church.

You can interpret this however you wish.

As for me, it gives me a glimpse of the ultimate destination that God has in mind for the world. It is a destination where, in the end, love, not violence, not terror, not death, but LOVE has won.

1. Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *Revelation: Vision of a Just World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 58.
2. Brian K. Blount, *Revelation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 90.
3. Barbara R. Rossing, *Journeys Through Revelation: Apocalyptic Hope for Today* (Louisville: Horizons, 2010), 25-26.
4. Jan Edmiston, “Random,” [www.achurchforstarvingartists.wordpress.com](http://www.achurchforstarvingartists.wordpress.com), June 29, 2016.