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“Worthy of Praising”

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**Psalm 23; 1 John 3: 16-24; Revelation 5: 1-14
May 03, 2009**

Have you ever had one of those dreams,
 where you think someone is writing a letter to you,
but you don't know who it is,
 because you can't quite make out the face of the writer?
But you can see the pen in hand, writing something across a sheet of paper,
 word by word, and you think if you could just get a little closer,
 or squint your eyes a little tighter,
you might be able to discern what those words
 on the page are saying to you.

And just when you think a few words are being revealed, you wake up!

We don't talk much about dreams or visions,
 or even about heaven in the Presbyterian Church,
 or, of all things, about the end of time.
But all of these things are present in today's reading from Revelation:
the culmination of John's vision of the court of heaven;
 and the splendor of the divine throne;
 and the multitudes offering ceaseless praise to God

when all is said and done.

In John's vision of the apocalypse, the One seated on the throne
holds a scroll that is sealed;
a scroll explaining the final events in human history
which will be set into motion by its opening.

However, one thing is sorely lacking: an agent worthy to open the scroll,
to reveal the plan and destiny of creation,
and to tip that first cosmic domino towards its final leaning.

Who will it be? Who is worthy?

A lion of a person, perhaps:

someone who embodies strength, majesty, courage
and intellectual excellence?

Guess again?

Out of the fog of John's vision steps not a roaring lion, but a lamb;
and not even a fine specimen of a lamb, but rather a wounded lamb;
a beat-up old lamb bearing the marks of sacrifice,
standing, looking as if it has been slaughtered,
but ready for service, nevertheless.

This ram-shackled lamb standing at the end of time,
brings to my mind other noteworthy images of sacrificial lambs.

To name a few:

The ram/lamb rambling onto the scene of Abraham's
hair-raising almost-sacrifice of his son, Isaac,
mysteriously appearing as a God-send,
caught by its horns in a thicket;

or the lamb or lambs quickly sacrificed by the Israelites
on the night of the Passover, just before the Exodus;
their blood spread on the lintels and doorposts
so that the angel of death

might pass-over and spare their firstborn sons (Exodus 12);

or the lamb-like suffering servant mentioned in Isaiah 53
as a prototype of the Messiah –
the one who was oppressed and afflicted,
but who did not open his mouth or utter a single “baaa” in protest.
Or if we stretch the of metaphor of lamb a little further,
I can’t help but think of the story of the Velveteen Rabbit,
that stuffed childhood toy who asks of the toy Skin Horse,
“What is real?”

To which the Skin Horse replies, “Real isn’t how you are made...It’s a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real.”

“Does it hurt?” asks the Velveteen Rabbit.

“Sometimes,” says the Skin Horse. “It doesn’t happen all at once. You become. It takes a long time. That’s why it doesn’t often happen to people who break easily, or who have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don’t matter at all, because once you are Real you can’t be ugly, except to people who don’t understand.” (Margery Bianco. *The Velveteen Rabbit*)

Back to Revelation, the real Lamb, the Lamb in lion’s clothing,
receives the scroll from the hand of God, and then the heavenly court
prostrates itself before the Lamb
and breaks forth in *a new song*, John says.

A new song is an expression found most frequently in the Psalms.

“Sing to the Lord *a new song*;

Play skillfully on the strings, with loud shouts”, Psalm 33 says.

“He put *a new song* in my mouth, a song of praise to our God.

Many will see and fear, and put their trust in the Lord”, Psalm 40 says.

“O sing to the Lord *a new song*, for he has done marvelous things.

His right hand and his holy arm have gained him victory," Psalm 98 says.

When are the faithful called to sing a new song?

With every new act of mercy,

a new song of praise and gratitude is called forth.

And then in increasing crescendo, the chorus cascades into doxology.

like tree frogs announcing the coming of rain,

or like cicadas on a hot summer night,

the crowd of singers swells from the four living creatures and

the 24 elders, or presbuteros, as they are called in Greek,

to a throng including many angels, and living creatures and elders,

myriads of myriads, thousands of thousands,

until it finally engulfs every creature in heaven and on earth

and under the earth and in the sea;

all creatures of our God and King;

all singing this new song of exuberant praise;

all caught up in this act of lyrical self-abandonment to the Lamb.

The intense crescendo is due to the exponential increase in voices,

but is also due to the object of their praise:

to the Lamb, the resurrected and victorious Christ,

the only one who is good enough, deserving, worthy,

to open the scroll,

and to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might

and honor and glory and blessing,

because he has suffered with his blood,

to purchase people for God,

who now will serve God as a kingdom of priests.

At the end of time, at the culmination of salvation history,

as the goal of all creation, there is a new song, and it is pure doxology,

and it is deafening frog-song and cicada song

to God and to the Lamb.

I haven't seen many books about that aspect of the end of time, have you?
I've seen books about the rapture, about being left behind,
about the thousand years of tribulation, about wars and rumors of wars;
speculation that amounts mostly to fear and trembling
about the way things will grind to a halt at the end.
But I can't seem to recall a single book asserting that in the end,
it's all about praising, can you?
And if in the end, it's all about praising,
shouldn't the NOW be all about praising, too?

During these times of economic downturn and hardship,
during these times of a potential pandemic of swine flu ,
during these times of pink slips and severance packages,
it seems a whole lot easier to complain than to praise, doesn't it?

As a matter of fact, I would venture to say that all of us are caught up
in a condition that I want to call PDD: Praise Deficiency Disorder.

Old Testament theologian Walter Brueggemann

says that praise is "problematic for those who perceive life as technique,
and live life as a series of problems to be solved".

(Walter Brueggemann. *Finally Comes the Poet*, p. 73).

Praise is not a utilitarian exercise.

Its practice does not bring immediate gratification or measurable results.

It doesn't seem to decrease the number of home mortgage foreclosures.

It doesn't seem to turn the bear market into a bull market overnight.

It doesn't seem to resurrect the 21 horses brought down in Florida.

As a matter of fact, "judged by any pragmatic norm, praise is foolishness.

It has no end beyond itself." (Brueggemann, p. 73)

And I have to admit, I often succumb to this disorder of praise deficiency
that renders me silent before God.

Not only do the newspapers, and media outlets
sing constantly and loudly their counter-lament,
but each one of us sings the old song of pain as well, and rightly so.

Friends come down with cancer.

Children grow up unable to function in the adult world.

Death takes a last surviving parent, leaving progeny who feel like orphans.

Spouses walk out of long-term relationships.

Alcohol becomes a last, best friend.

Life-long training for a fulfilling career comes to naught.

Drugs numb attentiveness to reality.

Dementia erases the memories of someone dear.

It's a serious problem, this juxtaposition of the our hard times,
with the grandeur of God;

this juxtaposition with our present state of struggle,

with God glorious grand finale of cosmic praise.

How do we sing a new song of doxology out of our pain?

How do we sing praise through our tears?

Who is worthy of just such a task?

Welsh poet and priest RS Thomas in his *Mass for Hard Times*, addresses
this very human dilemma in his poem,

Tell Us

We have had names for you:

The Thunderer, the Almighty

Hunter, Lord of the snowflake

and the saber-toothed tiger.

One name we have held back

unable to reconcile it

with the mosquito, the tidal-wave,

the black hole into which

time will fall. You have answered

*us with the image of yourself
on a hewn tree, suffering
injustice, pardoning it;
pointing as though in either
direction; horrifying us
with the possibility of dislocation.
Ah, love, with your arms out
wide, tell us how much more
they must still be stretched
to embrace a universe drawing
away from us at the speed of light.*

The answer is that no one is worthy, by her or his own right.

Each of us could say that the song of praise is not new,
but that it is the same old doxology that we've been singing
our whole lives.

What makes the song of praise a new song,
is that the faithful are called to sing it again with every new act of mercy,
just because, as I used to tell my children;
just because the faithful in heaven and on earth
and under the earth and in the sea
are singing it for us and with us:
as if they were a crowd gathered at the end of a marathon,
cheering as we run, walk, or crawl across the finish line;
as if they were the gallery gathered at the final round
of a golf-tournament, cheering as we walk up to the 18th hole;
as if they were the hat-wearers at a horse race,
going wild as we ride from least-favored position,
against the rail, to the front of the pack,
as if they were the 150 members of Durham's Choral Society

and the NC Symphony filling Duke Chapel
with the *Sanctus* of Verdi's Requiem;
as if they were the swelling tree-frog chorus,
calling forth rain at the end of a long drought,
as if they were the mighty crescendo of cicados,
rising to new life after 17 years of near-death.

Because they sing a new song at the end, we sing a new song now.

Because as individuals, that new song of praise often sticks in our throat,
the community above and the community around
us sings it with us and for us.

The faithful are worthy to sing a new song because of our baptism,
because we have been dipped in the God-water
that can gush forth in any wilderness;
because we have been sprinkled
in God-streams that can flow quickly in any desert;
because we have been submerged in God-wells of living water,
that springs up to eternal life.

We are worthy to sing a new song of praise, because the Lamb is worthy.

Worth is conferred upon us by the Lamb,
who has suffered to redeem us for service to God.

Ah, love with your arms stretched out wide,.

Tell us how much more they must still be stretched.

In our poverty of spirit, we will sing with the thousands and thousands
the new song of praise to God and to the Lamb.

And in the end.....guess what?

There is no end. Doxology is endless.

The hymns of praise to God and to the Lamb continue ceaselessly,
forever and ever. Amen.