

SERMON: Lamb and Shepherd

TEXT: Revelation 7:9-17

Everybody loves a good comeback story. So, even I, someone who has no interest in the sport of golf, was impressed to learn that Tiger Woods recently won the Master's Tournament in Augusta, Georgia. It has reportedly been over ten years since he won a major tournament, and it is said that his is the biggest comeback the world of sports has ever seen.

This victory came after years of struggle for him personally and physically, some of it self-inflicted and some which he could not control. But no one would argue that he certainly has had his share of suffering. Which, of course, makes his comeback all the more impressive. A victim of suffering, he has risen victorious.

It is a resurrection story, of a sort. Inspiring because of the great divide one must cross to go from such a low position to such a high position. And the metaphor, while fitting perhaps, isn't a perfect illustration of the idea from Revelation that Christ is both Lamb and Shepherd.

We don't spend much time on the idea that Jesus is the Lamb of God, so let's look at that image more closely.

But the lamb was a powerful image, particularly for the Jews of Biblical times. In the temple where the Jews worshipped, lambs (along with other animals) were brought as an offering. They were slaughtered on the altar, and their blood was poured over all sides of the altar. Such sacrifices were offered to God as a way of paying for one's sins. If you brought a lamb to worship and killed it on the altar, your sins would be forgiven.

Before Jesus began his ministry, just after John baptized him, John introduced him with the words, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." Jesus, as the Lamb of God, was the one who would be sacrificed, the one whose blood would be shed. Jesus would be **THE SACRIFICIAL LAMB**.

I find it interesting that we don't seem to be moved or troubled by this image much. Especially in our time, when many animals have risen to such a high status for many people. Pets have become our "fur babies" and there often seems to be greater outrage over the abuse of animals than over domestic abuse. Now that I say that, perhaps it is more acceptable to us for Jesus to be sacrificed than for an actual lamb to be slaughtered.

For the Jews, the term Lamb of God also refers to the Passover Lamb. It was the last of the ten plagues placed upon the Egyptians to convince the Pharaoh to free the Hebrew slaves. The plague would kill all the firstborn babies in the land – humans and animals alike. And the only thing that would save the Hebrew babies would be for each family to paint over the doorway of the house with the blood of a sacrificed lamb. If they did this, God would “pass over” their homes, not touching them with the most destructive of all the plagues. Just as the blood of the Passover Lamb saved and freed the Israelites, so the blood of Jesus, as the Lamb of God, saves and frees us. His blood paid for our sins. He sacrificed his own life to give us abundant and eternal life.

You can't talk about salvation without talking about suffering.

Commenting on today's passage from the Book of Revelation, one theologian wrote that in our culture today, victory means, *The one with the most toys wins; [or] the one with the most money...the biggest house...the most power wins.* “In Revelation we hear again the Christian message that none of these definitions of victory matches the victory of the Christian life. For John, ultimate Christian victory comes in death. This claim is important to hear during the days of Eastertide, when we proclaim again and again exactly what the death of Christ

means for Christians. Dying and rising in Christ is how we become victors. We are conquerors not because we escape persecution – Christ did not escape it – but because like him we are God’s children. Joining the great multitude in John’s vision, we too recognize our shepherd in *the Lamb at the center of the throne*, who will guide us to springs of living water, where *God will wipe away every tear from our eyes.*” (Dana Ferguson, *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 2)

The Lamb is the Shepherd. The one who suffered and was sacrificed for us does not save us from suffering. But the one who suffered and was sacrificed for us is the same one who will care for us, comfort us, guide us through our suffering, and bring us to victory.

Another scholar wrote that, “John’s vision of the victorious Lamb and the joyful multitude that surrounds him cannot be separated from the reality of suffering that accompanies loving obedience to God. As the church continues to journey through [Eastertide], the Great Fifty Days, the most festive season of the Christian year, it remembers that the victory we celebrate was won in, with, and through – not apart from – rejection, suffering, and death. At the same time, there is ample opportunity for... comfort, since the Lamb is also a Shepherd who

provides, protects, cares for, and lovingly leads his flock.” (Michael Pasquarello III, Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 2)

You may have heard of Rachel Held Evans, a Christian columnist, blogger, and best-selling author who recently died unexpectedly and much too young, at the age of 37. Her name has been familiar to me for quite a while, but I haven't gotten around to reading any of her books. Many of my clergy friends, though, have been posting quotes since her death on May 4<sup>th</sup>. Here's one that was powerful to me, especially in this Easter season. “Baptism reminds us that there's no ladder to holiness to climb, no self-improvement plan to follow. It's just death and resurrection over and over again, day after day, as God reaches down into our deepest graves and with the same power that raised Jesus from the dead wrests us from our pride, our apathy, our fear, our prejudice, our anger, our hurt, and our despair.”

Jesus, the Lamb of God, represents suffering and death. Jesus, the Shepherd, represents healing and resurrection. In his vision, John described “a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb.” When questioned about who they were, John answered, “These are they who have come out of the

great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and 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.”

I know a young woman in Minnesota named Kathryn. She recently turned 40, she’s been fighting a terrible cancer for at least three years, she lost a baby due to the cancer diagnosis, and she has four other young children and a husband at home. Kathryn has come close to death several times. In terms of the suffering she has endured, and continues to endure, Kathryn is a lamb.

But Kathryn and her husband have a very strong faith, which they live and teach to their children. They are very honest about their fears, but they always find reasons to be grateful. Last summer, the family made a point to study ideas about heaven. Kathryn has also been teaching the children how to cook, and they all have chores to help take care of the house. In terms of comfort and guidance, Kathryn is a shepherd.

When she comes out of the great ordeal – whether in this life or the next – Kathryn will worship God day and night. She and her family will find shelter in God’s love. The lamb will be their shepherd, will lead them to the springs of the water of life, and will wipe every tear from their eyes.

Through all our ordeals, may we be as faithful... to the glory of God!

AMEN.