

Revelation 5:1-14

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Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho

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"Who is Worthy?"

Early in our text we hear the question: Who is worthy? It's a fairly normal question. The personnel manager for a large company might ask: Who is worthy for the important position of product manager. The baseball team manager might ask: Who is worthy to be the starting pitcher for the crucial playoff game? They are looking for someone who is ready, willing, and able. In these examples, the question measures qualifications, ability, and talent. Eventually someone will be found to do the job.

But when the question is asked in heaven in Revelation 5, at first no one was found who was worthy. You see, the job was far bigger than keeping a company afloat or saving a season for a team. Let's go back and set the scene. Chapters 4 & 5 of Revelation are set in the throne-room of heaven. In chapter four we see the splendor of heaven and hear everyone living in heaven praising God the Father who sat on the throne, saying, *"Worthy are you, our Lord and God to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created."*

Then in chapter five the One seated on the throne holds a scroll with seven seals. A strong angel asks, *"Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?"* In the picture language of Revelation, the scroll is symbolic of all history between the first coming and the return of Christ. In summary, it contains everything that has happened, is happening, and will happen to God's people. But in order for the plan of salvation to move forward to its ultimate revelation, the scroll must be opened so the events can take place. All of history depends upon finding someone in heaven who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals. This is far more significant than a job or a playoff. It takes someone uniquely qualified to be worthy of controlling all of history.

And no one was found anywhere who was worthy. No one was ready, willing, or able. That sad fact caused John to weep loudly. After all that he had seen in his life, all the high expectations, this was the ultimate disappointment, the most devastating letdown. But just when despair was about to take over, one of the heavenly Elders intervened with these words of good news, *"Weep no more; behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that He can open the scroll and its seven seals."* He was pointing to the great historical fact of the victory of Jesus Christ, who was a human descendant of David and Judah. By His perfect life on earth and His sacrificial death on the cross He defeated the enemies of sin, death, and the devil. Now, under His control, time could move ahead with hope toward the Great Last Day of victory.

Then comes a high point of all history. Just as the Worthy One is announced, He appears on the scene. He had ascended from earth and had arrived in heaven. He was standing before the throne. You might expect to hear John record seeing something like the glorious Son of Man that was described in last Sunday's reading. But no. Instead he sees a Lamb standing, bloodied, *as though it had been slain, with seven horns and seven eyes.* In this way, the entirety of the person and work of Christ is flashed before the eyes of the faithful so they may see and believe. How is that? The seven horns and eyes show His almighty divine nature and the lamb shows His true humanity.

In Old Testament times the Passover Lamb had been the substitute for God's people as its blood was shed to provide deliverance from death. Lambs were slaughtered in the temple

sacrifice to point ahead to the perfect Lamb who would pay for sin once and for all. John the Baptist had pointed to Jesus saying, "*Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.*" Jesus was crucified on the Jewish Day of Preparation, when all the lambs were slaughtered for the Passover Feast. The Lamb slain pointed to Jesus' sacrifice for sin on Calvary's cross which resulted in the victory evidenced by His standing before the throne. His control of the future was depicted when He took the scroll. There is no doubt that He is worthy.

The four living creatures and the twenty-four elders then sing a song telling why He is worthy. "*Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood, you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priest to our God, and they shall reign on the earth.*" He is worthy because His blood was the price that bought us back from a life of hopelessness that ends in eternal death. His blood purchased us to be people of God, part of His family, members of His kingdom, serving Him by pointing others to Him.

Then the whole company of heaven joins in with the familiar hymn of praise that begins, "Worthy is the Lamb." The words echo the worship given to God the Father a chapter earlier. This parallel worship expresses the Oneness of the Lamb with the Father as true God. By worshipping Christ, we worship God. He is worthy in heaven.

Up to now, we have stood alongside John and viewed a heavenly scene of worthiness and glory. As we move forward through the events of our lives toward the conclusion of this life, the question must be asked, "Who is worthy to be in heaven?" Looking around at our own thoughts and words and actions, we must sadly conclude that no one is found who is worthy. All the daily sins that have accumulated through the years surely disqualify us from standing in the presence of the holy, sinless God. No amount of good works or decent behavior can wipe away the awful reality of our sad record. God demands perfection and we're far from it. If that reality was all that we could see, we should all be weeping along with John at our hopelessness.

But I have the joyful privilege to announce with the heavenly elder, "*Weep no more!*" I have already relayed to you the reason: With His blood, Jesus has redeemed us. Rev. 1:5 states that He has *freed us from our sins by His blood*. The resurrected and ascended Jesus is victorious over sin, death, and hell, and He shares that victory with us. In Christ, we are worthy. God didn't just plan out how to pay for sins, He also set in place a delivery system so that forgiveness, life, and salvation can be applied to each one of us.

In the waters of Holy Baptism our sins were washed away and a new nature, a new life of faith, was planted within us. Romans 6 tells us that *all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death. Since we have been united with Him in a death like His, we shall certainly be united with Him in a resurrection like His*. When God acts in Baptism, He grants us all the benefits earned by Jesus in His death and resurrection.

Like the plants I've been setting out in the garden, that life of faith needs to be nourished in order to grow and thrive. With Jesus' command to make disciples by baptizing is the responsibility of *teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you*. Through the Word of Gospel, forgiveness is announced and the new life is strengthened, especially in hearing the Word read and explained in the Divine Service. The Lord's Supper is a way of receiving forgiveness, life, and salvation that touches all five of our senses. It is a glorious foretaste of the feast to come when the Lord Himself feeds us in the never-ending banquet of heaven.

The Holy Spirit uses the Means of Grace, Word and Sacrament, to transform us from someone unworthy into a forgiven sinner. By God's transforming grace, we are worthy of being

in heaven where we can see the Lord in all His glory and worship Him. And that glorious transformation is solidly based on the shed blood of the Lamb.

The later chapters of Revelation reveal all the trial and turmoil that redeemed saints must go through until they are delivered into the glorious presence of God. But the solid promise is that for those who keep feeding their faith and life with Word and Sacrament and who cling to the promise of forgiveness and heaven, nothing can take away the worthiness given to them by the triumphant Lamb. Believers who have followed that prescribed pattern and have gladly received God's grace and mercy can be confident as they face the transition from this life to the next. From the youngest to the oldest, may each one here have the blessed certainty that in the blood of Christ the Lamb, you are worthy. *"To Him be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!"* Amen.