

Sermon 3.12.17 – the seven seals: Revelation 5 Rev. Rosalind Gnatt

Then I saw a scroll in the right hand of the one who was sitting on the throne. There was writing on the inside and the outside of the scroll, and it was sealed with seven seals.

² And I saw a strong angel, who shouted with a loud voice: "Who is worthy to break the seals on this scroll and open it?" ³ But no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll and read it. Then I began to weep bitterly because no one was found worthy to open the scroll and read it. ⁵ But one of *the twenty-four elders* said to me, "Stop weeping! Look, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the root of David, has won the victory and is worthy to open the scroll and its seven seals." ⁶ Then I saw a Lamb that looked as if it had been slaughtered, but it was now standing between the throne and *the four living beings* and among the twenty-four elders. He had seven horns and seven eyes, which represent the *sevenfold Spirit of God* that is sent out into every part of the earth. ⁷ He stepped forward and took the scroll from the right hand of the one sitting on the throne. ⁸ And when he took the scroll, the four living beings and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb.

- *Seven, the fourth prime number, is not only a Mersenne prime (since $2^3 - 1 = 7$) but also a double Mersenne prime since the exponent, 3, is itself a Mersenne prime. It is also a Newman–Shanks–Williams prime, a Woodall prime, a factorial prime, a lucky prime, a happy prime, a safe prime (the only Mersenne safe prime), and the fourth Heegner number.*

If you're a mathematician, that makes sense to you... Math, however, is not the only area where the number seven is significant. For example, there are 7 deadly sins, 7 classical planets, 7 heavens, 7 days of the week, 7 colors of the rainbow, 7 seas, 7 continents, 7 kings and 7 emperors of Rome. There's more: there are 7 pure tones in the musical diatonic scale. In ancient Egypt, 7 was the God number. The number 7 shows up so many times in the Bible that, for the sake of time and our patience, let's just say that, in the ancient Jewish tradition, 7 is the ultimate, conclusive and magical number.

In today's text, we have seven seals; a slaughtered lamb with seven horns, seven eyes, and the seven spirits of God, along with four living beings and 24 elders. The caste of characters come from the Hebrew Bible:

- King David identified 24 priestly families, and the elders of those families.
- The four living beings, or creatures, from the prophecy of Ezekiel, are an ox, a lion, an eagle and a human: the kings of their various species.
- Isaiah identified the seven spirits of God, the I AM, within which are the spirits of wisdom, of understanding, of counsel, of power, of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD.
- The 20th century spiritual leader Emmett Fox named these seven aspects of God Life, Truth, Love, Intelligence, Soul, Spirit and Principle.

The revelation of John of Patmos is the strangest writing in the Christian Bible, a text that continues to be contested in parts of the Christian church to this day. When I was a child, it was the stuff of nightmares: bloody, violent battles between strange animals and half-humans; seven-headed sea creatures and dragons; two hundred million lion-headed soldiers, and more.

So what are these seven seals? Seals were meant to protect important documents from curious and unworthy eyes. The one who is worthy is the one who is to break the seal. The seven seals of the scroll are, of course, not ordinary seals. Like Raiders of the Lost Ark, every seal unleashes a BIG SURPRISE.

- With the breaking of the first seal, a white horse appears, whose kingly rider has a bow with which to conquer.
- The second seal unleashes a red horse, whose rider had a great sword with which to destroy peace on earth.
- The third seal unleashes a black horse, whose rider holds a scale – a supposed symbol of the scarcity of food and of the oppressive taxation of the Roman government.

- The fourth seal uncovers the pale horse with Death astride. Death is charged with killing a quarter of the earth with violence, famine and sickness.
- The fifth seal shows the martyrs of the faith, calling out for justice. They are told to patiently wait until the rest of the faithful have been killed.
- The sixth seal unleashes the great earthquake, causing the stars to fall, the mountains to crumble. This is the great day of wrath.
- With the breaking of the seventh seal, there is silence. Then the seven angels before the throne are ordered to pour out the wrath of God on every corner of the earth.

„God is punishing us. God is punishing them.” Earthquake; floods; fires that decimate entire mountains, valleys, cities; volcanoes; and of course war, terrorist attacks, famine, disease, environmental devastation – no wonder every generation has its rapture - its “end of time” prophets. I recently told a group about a sunny summer day in New York City, 35 years ago. I was waiting at a pedestrian crosswalk with our Holy Trinity Lutheran Church Young Adults’ group. We were on our way to an anti-nuclear rally, in our tee shirts, with a picture of Martin Luther on the front. The cartoon bubble coming from his mouth said, “No Nukes.” At our feet we noticed a pair of shoes, neatly standing there, as if also waiting to cross the street. Our young pastor looked at the empty shoes, and looked up at the blue sky, and said, “You know, I look at those empty shoes and wonder if the Rapture happened and left me behind.” We laughed.

Things back then were politically tense; the United States and Russia were in a nuclear arms race. We young people were naïve enough to think we could do something about it. Things at the end of the first century, when Revelation was written, were even worse for the Jewish subjects of the Roman empire. Religious differences caused fighting, bordering on civil war, between Jewish factions. Rome was brutal to resisters. Looking through the intervening 200 centuries, it is hard to find one time in which some part of the world was not in chaos. On record for being the most violent, was the 20th century.

What does this mean – this text with the book of seven magical seals: seals that release destruction on the world; this slaughtered lamb with seven eyes and seven horns? I have to go to the end to find the redemption of this story. It goes like this:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the old heaven and the old earth had disappeared. And the sea was also gone. ² And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven like a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.

³ I heard a loud shout from the throne, saying, “Look, God’s home is now among God’s people! God will live with them, and they will be his people. God will be with them. ⁴ He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these things are gone forever.”

In the Gospel of Luke, the temple leaders wanted to know when the kingdom of God was coming. Jesus said “The kingdom of God never comes by watching for it. You cannot say, 'Look, here it is', or 'there it is', for the kingdom of God is inside you.”.

The kingdom of God is: not will be, but is. And who are blessed in this kingdom? The spiritually humble, the sad, the gentle, the seekers of justice, the merciful, the peacemakers, the ones who risk themselves for the sake of justice.

We may be in the midst of the last battle – who knows? The presidents of North Korea and of the United States seem eager for nuclear war. As likely devastating is the mass decimation of the Earth’s fragile ecosystems in the name of commerce. None of that excuses us from identify and living the kingdom of God that IS within us. Worthy to be called the children of God are those who are led by the spirit.

Amen