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Revelation 14:1-5

23rd Message

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FOLLOWING THE LAMB

SERIES: THE SEEN AND THE UNSEEN

These past eight days the world has been remembering the dropping of the two atomic bombs on Japan. Two weeks ago I generated a stir with my comments about the bomb. Many people have asked me about those comments. Am I a pacifist? Was America right to drop the bomb?

I am not a pacifist. Governments have the responsibility to uphold justice and restrain evil. At times, regrettably, this requires going to war. I have no problem with Christians serving in the military. In fact, there ought to be Christians in the military. And they ought to serve as good soldiers, airmen and seamen. In this, as in all matters, Christians should seek to do their job well. At times this will require them taking life. Loss of life is a regrettable but inevitable consequence of war. The Allies were right to go to war against the Axis powers. I don't have a problem with the dropping of the atomic bomb. The bombs were dropped on a nation persisting in its evil by a nation seeking to terminate that evil. The loss of life was tragic. War is tragic, but that doesn't make it unavoidable.

Terrorism, like piracy, is evil and governments have a responsibility to fight it. Failure to do so is a failure to meet their responsibility to govern, to uphold justice, to restrain evil. This nation is now engaged in a war on terror.

Just a few days after the 9/11 attacks, President Bush announced that "this crusade, this war on terror, is going to take a while."¹ His reference to the war on terror as a crusade, though it went initially unnoticed here in the USA, caused immediate outcry in Europe. It evoked memories of the medieval Crusades when European knights, marching under the banner of the cross and with the backing of the Church, fought the Moslem rulers of the Holy Land. The word crusade is derived from the Latin *crux*, cross. The Crusaders were those marked by the cross.

The Crusaders were not the first to march into battle under the sign of the cross. In 312, Constantine won the Battle of the Milvian Bridge to become sole ruler of the western half of the Roman Empire. The previous day, after praying for divine help, he had seen emblazoned across the sky a cross of light, and the words "in this sign conquer" (Greek *en toutō nika*, Latin *in hoc signo vince*). The sign was confirmed to him in a vision that night. The next day he ordered that the Chi-Rho symbol of Christ replace the dragon on the military standards, and that it be emblazoned on every shield. Marching into battle behind his new standard, Constantine won a great victory. For good or for ill, the Western world and the Church have not been the same since.

It is necessary for governments to use force to restrain evil. But my sermons these past few weeks have not been about how the state is to respond to evil. They have been about how God's people are to respond to evil. The world has a 1700-year legacy of problems arising from the state and/or the Church following the Constantinian model, marching into battle under the sign of the cross. Sometimes

it has been the state co-opting the Church; sometimes the Church co-opting the state.

It is undeniable that there is evil in the world. Revelation 12-13 has given us a symbolic explanation of this evil. These two chapters portray a battle between two kingdoms. On one side is the infernal trinity of the dragon and two beasts. On the other side is the heavenly Trinity of God, Lamb and seven-fold Spirit. The dragon is implacably opposed to God's purposes and is constantly attacking them. But God has thwarted his every turn—up to a certain point. He has thwarted his assault upon the Messiah. He has thwarted his assault upon heaven. He has thwarted his assault upon the Church. But he does not thwart his assault upon the saints. John sees this assault on the saints in the guise of the two mythical monsters of destructive chaos, the sea monster and the land monster. One uses tyrannical power, the other uses deception. Dragon, beast and false prophet seem all-powerful and invincible. What is God's response? Revelation 14:1-5 gives us the antithesis to the visions of chapters 12-13. It gives us the heavenly vision to set against the earthly visions of dragon, beast and false prophet. It is the Unseen against the Seen. In the "seen" world, visible to the unaided eye, "the wrong seems oft so strong." But in the unseen world, visible to the eye of faith, "God is the Ruler yet."²

Gazing into this world that is unseen to the unaided eye, John writes,

Then I looked, and there before me was the Lamb, standing on Mount Zion, and with him 144,000 who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads. And I heard a sound from heaven like the roar of rushing waters and like a loud peal of thunder. The sound I heard was like that of harpists playing their harps. And they sang a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and the elders. No one could learn the song except the 144,000 who had been redeemed from the earth. These are those who did not defile themselves with women, for they kept themselves pure. They follow the Lamb wherever he goes. They were purchased from among men and offered as firstfruits to God and the Lamb. No lie was found in their mouths; they are blameless. (14:1-5 NIV)

John describes what he *sees* (v 1) and what he *hears* (vv 2-5). We shall observe that this is not the first time that he does this, setting what he sees against what he hears.

A. What John Sees (14:1)

John sees, standing upon Mount Zion, the Lamb and with him 144,000. Where is this Mount Zion? Zion originally referred to the fortress which David captured when he took Jerusalem, but the word came to have a much more expansive meaning. It acquired a symbolic, theological meaning in addition to its geographical meaning. Zion has theological significance for three reasons. It is the city of God, the place where God put his Name, the earthly dwelling-

place of the heavenly King. It is the city of David, where God has installed his king over his kingdom on earth. And it is the city of God's people; indeed, the word is often used to refer to the people rather than the city. Temple, palace, and city: Zion is the place where God and his people dwell together in his kingdom. Though Zion lay at the symbolic heart of Israel, Zion was not just for Israel. The Old Testament looked ahead to the day when the Gentiles, even Israel's enemies, would come streaming into Zion, as for example in Psalm 87:

**He has set his foundation on the holy mountain;
the LORD loves the gates of Zion
more than all the dwellings of Jacob.**

Glorious things are said of you,
O city of God.

**"I will record Rahab and Babylon
among those who acknowledge me—
Philistia too, and Tyre, along with Cush—
and will say, 'This one was born in Zion.'"**

Indeed, of Zion it will be said,
"This one and that one were born in her,
and the Most High himself will establish her."
The LORD will write in the register of the peoples:
"This one was born in Zion."

As they make music they will sing,
"All my fountains are in you." (Ps 87)

Verse 3 gave John Newton the opening line for his hymn,

Glorious things of thee are spoken,
Zion, city of our God;
He whose word cannot be broken
Formed thee for his own abode.³

The glorious things said of Zion are that it would be the destination of world pilgrimage. Even the archetypal enemies of Israel—Egypt (Rahab), Babylon, Philistia and Tyre—would be incorporated into God's kingdom. It's a breathtaking vision.

In the Old Testament, Zion was the physical city Jerusalem. But in the New Testament, the apostles realized that the earthly Zion mirrored a heavenly Zion. In the Old Testament, God brought his people to Mount Sinai, there to constitute them as his people. But, as we saw in our Scripture reading this morning, we have come not to Mount Sinai, but to a much greater mountain:

**But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem,
the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon
thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the
firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come
to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men
made perfect, to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to
the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of
Abel. (Heb 12:22-24)**

Mount Zion is the New Jerusalem, the heavenly city of which the earthly Jerusalem was an earthly counterpart. Though the venue has changed, the theological symbolism is the same: temple, palace and city where God and his people dwell together in his kingdom. But the venue has not really changed: the earthly Zion was only ever an earthly counterpart of a heavenly reality. They are the poles of the heaven-earth axis.

Here on Mount Zion, God has installed his king, as announced in Psalm 2:6, "I have installed my King on Zion, my holy hill." Since

the heavenly Zion is greater than the earthly Zion, we expect a king greater than the earthly David, a king who is the fulfilment of all the Messianic promises, a king who is the Lion of the Tribe of Judah, great David's greater Son. But what John sees is the Lamb.

In chapter 5, John juxtaposed what he saw and what he heard: he *heard* that the Lion of the tribe of Judah had conquered, but he *saw* a Lamb standing as though slain (5:5-6). He thus equates the conquering Lion and the slain Lamb. The Messiah's path to victory and enthronement lay in sacrificial death. Here in chapter 14, we are again shown that the one whom God has installed as King of kings and Lord of lords is the slain Lamb. This Lamb is God's answer to the dragon and the two beasts.

With him John sees 144,000, each inscribed on the forehead with the name of the Lamb and the name of the Lamb's father. These are the heavenly antithesis of the inhabitants of the earth, each inscribed with the mark of the beast (13:16-17). Everyone in Revelation is marked: the inhabitants of the earth bear the mark of the beast, the dwellers in heaven bear the seal of God. Everyone belongs to one kingdom or the other. Everyone worships in one kingdom or the other.

John had previously encountered this group of 144,000 in chapter 7, where a seal was placed upon the foreheads of God's servants. This seal was a protective one, to protect the saints from divine judgment. Again John juxtaposed what he saw and what he heard. John "*heard* the number of those sealed: 144,000 from all the tribes of Israel" (7:4), but he *saw* "a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language" (7:9) who have been martyred (7:14). Again John juxtaposes what he sees and what he hears to indicate an identity between two seemingly incongruous entities: the 144,000 of Israel are the countless international multitude. Those with God's protective seal have been delivered from the great tribulation by martyrdom.

This is a crucial point of interpretation: these are not two different groups, but one and the same. These are the servants of God, the saints, God's faithful people. In Old Testament terms God's people is Israel. But God has opened wide the doors to his kingdom to include Gentiles as well as Jews. To return to my comments of four weeks ago, is this replacement theology? Has the Church replaced Israel in God's plan? No, there is but one people of God. In the Old Testament that people was primarily ethnic Israel. But in the New Testament this same people of God is an international body of Jew and Gentile together. It is the Church, the *ekklesia*, the Greek word that was used in the Old Testament to translate *qāhāl*, the congregation of Israel. Several books of the New Testament describe at length this transformation from an ethnically limited people to a truly international people: e.g. Acts, Galatians, Ephesians.

Using Old Testament imagery, God's faithful people are the Lord's army, drawn up in battle array: 12,000 from each tribe. They are ready for Holy War. Using New Testament imagery, they are a vast international choir, singing to God and to the Lamb.

How big is this people of God? From one point of view, it is 144,000. This is a richly symbolic number: 12 × 12 × 1000. Twelve is the number of the people of God. Ten is the number of completion, and ten cubed or a thousand indicates a large number. Putting it together, 144,000 indicates a very large and complete people of God: they're all there, none is missing. It's not a restrictive number, meaning that there are *only* 144,000 and not 144,001. It's an expansive number. This is confirmed by John's other description: the 144,000

is also a countless multitude. That's what God promised to Abraham: that his descendants would be as numerous as the sand on the sea shore and the stars in the sky.

The 144,000 seen by John in chapter 14 are the saints, the people redeemed unto God by the Lamb. They are the martyrs who have endured in their faithful witness. They are the army of the Lord, headed by their commander-in-chief, the Lamb: "The Lamb and his fair army doth on Mount Zion stand."⁴ They will reappear in chapter 19 as the armies of heaven riding behind the Rider on the White Horse whose names are Faithful and True, the Word of God, King of kings and Lord of lords (19:11-16).

B. What John Hears (14:2-5)

John next describes what he hears: a great company of heavenly musicians. For the third time he juxtaposes what he sees and what he hears to indicate an identity between two groups of very different description. Just as in chapter 7, the 144,000 of the Lamb's army are also the heavenly choir. They are ready to march into battle behind their commander, but they sing that victory has already been won. Their commander has been killed in battle, as have they, but he stands triumphant at their head. And so they sing! The volume of their singing is so great that it sounds like rushing waters or loud thunder. The song they sing is a new song. Frequently the psalmist calls upon God's people to sing a new song, celebrating his acts of salvation. *Shir Hadash* (New Song) is a favorite name for synagogues, such as the one in Los Gatos. What is the new song that they sing?

In chapter 5, the four cherubim and the twenty-four elders, each with a harp, fell down before the Lamb and sang a new song:

**"You are worthy to take the scroll
and to open its seals,
because you were slain,
and with your blood you purchased men for God
from every tribe and language and people and nation.
You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our
God,
and they will reign on the earth."** (5:9-10)

The cherubim and elders sang a new song, celebrating the Lamb's victory. They celebrated that act of redemption as onlookers. They were not the beneficiaries of the Lamb's actions: as heavenly beings they had no need of redemption, but they sang in response to what they had seen. Now the saints, earthly beings who have been raised to heaven, join in this chorus. The only ones able to learn this song are the 144,000 who have been redeemed from the earth, that is all the saints. The saints now sing as the beneficiaries of that redemption, singing before the cherubim and elders who had started the song.

In chapter 15, John describes a similar vision into heaven:

I saw what looked like a sea of glass mixed with fire and, standing beside the sea, those who had been victorious over the beast and his image and over the number of his name. They held harps given them by God and sang the song of Moses the servant of God and the song of the Lamb:

**"Great and marvelous are your deeds,
Lord God Almighty.
Just and true are your ways,
King of the ages.
Who will not fear you, O Lord,**

**and bring glory to your name?
For you alone are holy.
All nations will come
and worship before you,
for your righteous acts have been revealed."** (15:2-4)

Israel of old sang the song of Moses beside the sea, celebrating God's victory over Pharaoh and their exodus from Egypt (Exod 15). The song of Moses has become the song of the Lamb, sung beside the crystal sea by the people whom he has led forth in a new exodus. The saints have made their exodus from the kingdom of this world into the kingdom of God, and they have made their exodus from earth to heaven. On earth the beast has been "given authority over every tribe, people, language and nation" (13:7), but the countless multitude is also drawn "from every nation, tribe, people and language" (7:9). God is plundering Satan's kingdom, transferring his people from the kingdom of darkness into his kingdom of light. Their exodus from earth seems to be defeat, for it is accomplished by the beast conquering them through death, but their exodus brings them to heaven, for it is they who emerge victorious over the beast, conquering him through the blood of the Lamb and through their faithful witness.

John hears the great multitude singing again in chapter 19, "like the roar of rushing waters and like loud peals of thunder":

**"Hallelujah!
For our Lord God Almighty reigns.
Let us rejoice and be glad
and give him glory!
For the wedding of the Lamb has come,
and his bride has made herself ready.
Fine linen, bright and clean,
was given her to wear."** (19:6-8)

This, then, is the new song sung by the saints. It is a song of victory, a song of celebration to God and to the Lamb. On earth, the dragon, the beast and the false prophet seem victorious. It seems that might is right. But,

**No song on Earth will ever sound
Like one before your throne
When myriads of the Angels sing
In Praise to you Alone.**⁵

The cherubim, the elders and the angels have sung this song before the throne. Now the faithful martyrs as well sing the song before the throne. It all takes place before the throne. The throne and the One seated upon it stand central in the Book of Revelation. All that is True revolves around this throne in Heaven. All that is False revolves around the counterfeit throne on Earth, the dragon's throne on which he has installed the beast. Everyone worships before one throne or the other. Revelation is written to comfort those who are suffering because they have centered themselves on the heavenly throne, and to chastise those who have taken their eye off that throne and cast it onto the earthly throne.

John gives a fourfold description of this choir of 144,000 singing before the heavenly throne:

These are those who did not defile themselves with women, for they kept themselves pure. They follow the Lamb wherever he goes. They were purchased from among men and offered as first-fruits to God and the Lamb. No lie was found in their mouths; they are blameless. (14:4-5)

They have not defiled themselves with women. This does not mean that only celibate males get into heaven. Sadly it did not take long for the early Church, influenced by neoplatonic philosophy which viewed matter as evil and spirit as good, to take a negative view to marriage. But the Bible never takes such a view. The meaning is clear if we look at the broader context. The 144,000 are the army of the Lord. In the Old Testament, Israel was to consecrate herself before holy war. The troops were to abstain from sexual relations prior to battle. Here in Revelation, the Lord's army has kept itself pure from defilement with the prostitute Babylon, from entanglement in the beast's kingdom. This is how they have "been victorious over the beast and his image and over the number of his name" (15:2).

They are without deceit and without blame. In the conflict between the world of the True and the world of the False they have remained pure and faithful. Nothing that is false is permitted into the New Jerusalem.

They have been redeemed from among men and offered to God and the Lamb as firstfruits, the first portion of the harvest which belongs to God. Later in chapter 14, John sees Jesus harvest the earth when the harvest is ripe. That harvest is a harvest unto judgment. But the saints are the firstfruits; they belong to God. They have been sealed with his seal of ownership, with his seal of protection. Though they be killed for their faithful witness, they have nothing to fear for they are dedicated to God.

Finally, and most beautifully, the saints follow the Lamb wherever he goes.

3. Following the Lamb

These past three weeks I have ended each sermon with the words, "Our Lamb has conquered, let us follow him," the words which appear on the picture with which I have closed each sermon. This picture is the Moravian seal, the emblem of the Moravian Church. The image at the center of this seal is an ancient motif of Christian symbolism and religious art. It is known formally as the *Agnus Dei* (Lamb of God), or colloquially as the Lamb and Flag. At the center of the image is a standing Lamb, Jesus the Lamb of God. The Lamb holds a staff, topped by a cross. From this staff flies a banner depicting a red cross on a white background. This is the banner of victory, the banner of resurrection. The same red cross appears on the halo behind the Lamb's head. The whole montage is a portrayal of key truths in Revelation. The Lamb was slain on the cross but emerged victorious in the resurrection. Victory has been accomplished not by the exercise of brute force, not by deception, but through sacrificial death and resurrection.

As I was researching the Moravian seal, I came across this comment by a Moravian pastor, apologizing for the symbol: "The war metaphor of the image and words may not be what the Moravian Church would choose were we creating our seal today; nevertheless, as our historic emblem, the Seal remains an important Moravian symbol." Sadly this pastor has interpreted the seal as a militaristic emblem. But if she understood Revelation, she would recognize it as an anti-militaristic emblem. Yes, the Lamb has conquered, but his path to victory was neither of the paths employed by the dragon: neither the path of power used by the beast, nor the path of deception used by the false prophet. Jesus the Lamb is Faithful and True. He bore faithful witness. In his mouth was found no lie. He kept himself pure and undefiled. He refused to respond to evil with evil. For this faithful witness he was put to death. It seemed that he had been conquered. But he died as the blameless, spotless Lamb of God. And so God vindicated him and his faithful obedient witness, raising him from death to new life, raising him to heaven, there to enthrone him as King of kings and Lord of lords. The saints are called to follow the Lamb wherever he goes. To follow him in faithful witness, with no lie in their mouth, bearing faithful witness to him that is True in a world in which much is false. To follow him blameless into death. To follow him in resurrection into new life. To follow him into heaven, there to stand on Mount Zion. This is how the dragon, the beast, and the false prophet are overcome.

Sadly, too often the lines between the two kingdoms have been blurred. The state has marched into battle under the banner of the cross. Or the Church has employed the dragon's methods of power and deceit to build its kingdom. The Church has only one weapon: its faithful witness to the death and resurrection of the Lamb whom it follows.

Our Lamb has conquered, let us follow him.

Thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him. (2 Cor 2:14)

1. Reply to a reporter's question, South Lawn of the White House, 9.16.2005. Online: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010916-2.html>.

2. Maltbie Babcock, hymn *This Is My Father's World* (1901).

3. John Newton, hymn *Glorious Things of Thee are Spoken* (1779).

4. Anne R. Cousins, hymn *The Sands of Time are Sinking* (1857).

5. P.A. Baggaley, poem *No Song on Earth* (1996).

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