

# ***A Vulnerable God***

Revelation 4:1-5:7

Sermon by Dan Schrock

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Advent 4

*After this I looked, and there in heaven a door stood open! And the first voice, which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet, said, "Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this." <sup>2</sup>At once I was in the spirit, and there in heaven stood a throne, with one seated on the throne! <sup>3</sup>And the one seated there looks like jasper and carnelian, and around the throne is a rainbow that looks like an emerald. <sup>4</sup>Around the throne are twenty-four thrones, and seated on the thrones are twenty-four elders, dressed in white robes, with golden crowns on their heads. <sup>5</sup>Coming from the throne are flashes of lightning, and rumblings and peals of thunder, and in front of the throne burn seven flaming torches, which are the seven spirits of God; <sup>6</sup>and in front of the throne there is something like a sea of glass, like crystal. Around the throne, and on each side of the throne, are four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind: <sup>7</sup>the first living creature like a lion, the second living creature like an ox, the third living creature with a face like a human face, and the fourth living creature like a flying eagle.*

*<sup>8</sup>And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and inside. Day and night without ceasing they sing, "Holy, holy, holy, the Lord God the Almighty, who was and is and is to come." <sup>9</sup>And whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to the one who is seated on the throne, who lives forever and ever, <sup>10</sup>the twenty-four elders fall before the one who is seated on the throne and worship the one who lives forever and ever; they cast their crowns before the throne, singing, "You are worthy, 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."*

*<sup>1</sup>Then I saw in the right hand of the one seated on the throne a scroll written on the inside and on the back, sealed with seven seals; <sup>2</sup>and I saw a mighty angel proclaiming with a loud voice, "Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?" <sup>3</sup>And no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or to look into it. <sup>4</sup>And I began to weep bitterly because no one was found worthy to open the scroll or to look into it. <sup>5</sup>Then one of the elders said to me, "Do not weep. See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals."*

*<sup>6</sup>Then I saw between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. <sup>7</sup>He went and took the scroll from the right hand of the one who was seated on the throne. (NRSV)*

## I

I once led a retreat for a small group of Christians. I began the retreat by asking them to sit quietly for a moment and identify the main image for God which they carried around in their heads. After a few minutes of silence, each person went around the circle and shared with us their main image for God. Most people admitted their basic image of God was that of a mighty king sitting on a regal throne, bearded and resplendent, imposing and awesome. They pictured God

as someone who vigorously fights evil, wipes out all enemies, and emerges from the fight as a victorious, supreme lord. Let's call this image "God as Commander in Chief," who by flicking one little finger can instantly change the course of the world.

You can find passages in the Bible that describe God more or less this way. However, we can get ourselves into a heap of trouble if this is our only image of God. For one thing, the Bible has hundreds of images for God. As an example, take the first two chapters of Genesis, which all by themselves have about twenty images for God, including artist, inventor, gardener, evaluator, experimenter, and others. Or take the small book of Hosea, which has some of the most eye-popping pictures of God anywhere in scripture, like God the Cuckolded Lover (2:2), or God the Maggot who eats putrid skin (5:12), and so on. Given this bounty of images for God, if we choose any one of them and willfully reject the others, we'll end up with a badly misguided view of God. By using a rich variety of metaphors for God, we end up instead with a more complex picture of who God actually is.

Another problem with imagining God as the Commander in Chief is that we're apt to get disappointed when God doesn't behave the way we think a Commander in Chief should behave. This may be one reason why so many of us ask how there can be so much evil in the world. If God is the great Commander in Chief, then why does evil run rampant? If God is so powerful and so good, why did that fine Christian mother of two preschoolers die of cancer? If God is supreme, why did I lose my job? If God can do anything, why are the rich flourishing and the poor suffering?

## II

For this reason, we have much to learn from the book of Revelation, because the great gift of Revelation is that it offers us a different image of God.

Revelation 4 starts with the image of God as Commander in Chief. With John of Patmos, we see a grand pyrotechnic display: a jasper and carnelian God seated on a throne, surrounded by a rainbow, shooting out thunder and lightning. The interesting thing about this vision is that it doesn't focus on God's personal appearance. Is God male or female? Does God look more like a burning fire, a wispy spirit, or an embodied human person? We have no idea from this particular vision. Even though there are lots of details here, the vision says very little about God's own appearance. It's as if what God looks like is not important.

That's because the book of Revelation wants us to look elsewhere, to a different image of God. This alternate image for God first appears in 5:6 and will become the primary theological metaphor for the rest of the book. This image is that of the Lamb, which looks as if it had been slaughtered. Of course this Lamb is none other than Christ, crucified and resurrected. From here on out, the Lamb will become the central governing image of Revelation, named a total of 27 times.

You could say that the book of Revelation prevents us from looking directly at God. Instead of looking at God, this book wants us to gaze on Christ the slaughtered Lamb. Why? Because only by gazing at that slaughtered Lamb can we really come to know who God is. It is the wounded Lamb who helps us understand the true character of God. Meditate on the wounded Lamb, and you will perceive the core of who God is.

The image of a wounded Lamb is radically different than the image of a commander in chief. Lambs do not wear body armor, fly F-35 fighter jets, or command nuclear aircraft carriers. By nature, lambs are tender, weak, and defenseless. They are easily attacked and injured. Lambs are hugely vulnerable.

### III

It's obvious to see how Jesus lived on earth as vulnerable person. Born a peasant baby in a peripheral part of the Roman empire, he was regularly vilified during adulthood as a religious heretic and a social troublemaker. A lot of powerful people attacked him, sometimes with good cause and sometimes without. In Matthew 26:53, Jesus revealed that in fact he had enormous power: if he wanted, he could have summoned 12 legions of angels to defend himself from harm, but instead he chose to let himself be arrested. Soon thereafter, he was marched through an unfair trial and humiliatingly nailed to a cross. From first to last, the man exuded vulnerability.

It takes more effort for us to see how God is vulnerable. We're so used to thinking of God as powerful that thinking of God as vulnerable is a big stretch. Yet that's exactly what the book of Revelation wants us to do. In Christ the Lamb, we now have the opportunity to perceive that God is also vulnerable, that God can also be wounded.

Think of it this way. From the get go, God created us with freedom of choice. This freedom, which God hard-wired into our makeup as human beings, gives us the ability to say yes to God—or to say no. From the beginning, God surely knew that we would often say no, that again and again we would reject God and go our own independent way. God also knew that when we say no, it would cause God immense pain. At creation, God whispered into our ear, "I love you," knowing we would not always reciprocate that divine love, and knowing our rejection would wound God greatly. It's hard for us to imagine how much pain we have inflicted on God during our lifetimes—much less all the pain we've caused God throughout the history of the human race.

#### IV

However, God willingly endures the pain of our rejection because of the potential benefits it has for us and for God. When God takes the posture of vulnerability, we benefit by being able to flourish in ways we couldn't if God were our puppeteer. In the context of God's gracious vulnerability, we are able to experience more freedom, more possibility, and more joy than we would if God behaved like an autocrat.

God also benefits by being vulnerable with us. When we choose to align ourselves with God, God gets to have us as affectionate friends and suitable partners in mission. God experiences a kind of joyful fellowship with us that wouldn't be possible if God operated like a dictator. God's vulnerability with us is alluring and magnetic. It motivates us, draws us, entices us—which is precisely the point. God's vulnerability creates a context for genuine intimacy with us.

To say this another way, God chooses to exercise relational power rather than authoritarian power. The power that God normally uses is to woo us, to court us, to romance us, to chase after us. This relational power respects our freedom of choice. We can say yes—and when we say yes, God is as happy as can be.

#### V

Here, three days before Christmas, we see directly in front of our eyes a baby whose vulnerability calls out to us. In front of our eyes we see the Lamb that was slain, whose vulnerability—and whose victory over evil—makes him worthy to receive power and riches, wisdom and strength, honor and glory.

May blessing and honor, glory and power, be to the One seated upon the throne, and to the Lamb, forever and ever. Amen.