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Bethesda, Maryland

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The 3rd Sunday of Easter
10:00 AM

“Cows in Heaven”

Then I John saw with my own eyes
and heard with my own ears
the sound of many messengers
around the throne –

Every creature that you can imagine—

And the elders – the wise ones who had led us—

And there were thousands and thousands –
maybe a hundred thousand—

Saying with voice like a megaphone—

“The little lamb that was slaughtered is heavy—
is important, is weighty—
The little lamb is worthy—
is strong enough to carry
power and wealth
and wisdom and strength
and honor and splendor
and greatness.”

And everything that is created—
Everything in the sky
and on the ground
and under the ground
and on the ocean and in the ocean—

I heard all these things saying—

“To the one sitting on the throne—
And to the little lamb—

Praise and honor
and strength and greatness
forever and ever.”
And four animals kept saying, “So be it.”

And the wise ones—the elders—
fell down and put their heads on the ground
as a way to show honor.

Revelation 5:11-14, translation and paraphrase from Greek by Tim Tutt.

Imagine a beautiful spring weekend. For whatever reason, you are fortunate enough to be surrounded by the people you love, family or friends. You wake up and one of the people you love has prepared a perfect breakfast—eggs, coffee, succulent bacon that tickles your taste buds. You laugh, you talk, you enjoy your meal. And then you head off to your favorite outing. Maybe a walk along the C&O Canal, maybe a movie or an art museum, or maybe an afternoon at a baseball game. At the baseball game, your team is ahead. One of your friends goes to the concession stand and buys you a refreshing cold beverage and the tastiest hamburger you've ever had. This is not some run-of-the-mill, pre-fab burger. This is grilled-to-perfection, free-range, gluten-free, no-artificial-hormones, organic, Montessori-educated beef. There you are with your friends or family, enjoying this tastiest treat on this beautiful spring day. You go home that night and go to bed as happy as you've ever been. The eggs and bacon for breakfast, the hamburger at the game, the companions. You think to yourself, "This was a perfect day."

And the next morning, you wake up dead. Maybe it's because of the bacon and the burger from the day before. But imagine you are dead and you find yourself in heaven. Imagine this heaven is just like all of the stereotypes we've been told: Streets of gold, crystal seas, choirs of angels, pearly gates. Except that when you get to the pearly gates, instead of Saint Peter at the check-in stand, as all the cartoonists have drawn it, there stands a cow. A cow is the bouncer at heaven's gates. You walk up to the cow and before you can say anything, the cow says, "Hey I recognize you. We've met before." "We have," you say, "Where?" "Yesterday at the baseball game," the cow says. "That hamburger you ate from the concession stand? That was me." You're at a complete loss for words. And the cow continues, "So welcome to heaven. By the way if you go down that street of gold and

around the crystal sea, just past the cherubim and the seraphim singing old hymns, you'll run into a herd of pigs. One of them was the bacon you had for breakfast yesterday."

I'm fairly sure that's not how heaven is, but why not?

John, who wrote the Book of Revelation, hinted in that direction. John has a vision. And in his vision John glimpses a life that is beyond this life, a world that is beyond this world. He calls it heaven. And he sees there, "Every creature that you can imagine"—people he says, but also, "everything that is created—everything in the sky and on the ground and under the ground and on the ocean and in the ocean—" And all of these things—all creatures—animals, people—everything—are joined together in some tremendous song and dance routine.

And it is bizarre and beyond comprehension. And it is bold and big.

And that is the point I want you to remember today: The bigness of God. As we begin this sermon series on the Book of Revelation, no matter what you think you've heard about this book—no matter how strange it is—the God we see there is not mean and small-minded. The God we see in Revelation is big and expansive.

We don't know much about this person, John, who wrote the Book of Revelation. He tells us in the Book that he was a follower of Jesus and that he was on the island of Patmos and that he had a revelation, a vision, a dream. Some people say that John of Patmos was the same person as John the Apostle, another of Jesus' followers. That's not very likely. John, who wrote the Book of Revelation, is not the same person who wrote the

Gospel of John. We do know that Patmos is a lonely, rocky island off the coast of modern-day Turkey. Historians guess that John had been exiled to Patmos as a prisoner.

John's vision, this revelation is fantastic—it's full of flying horses and dragons and earthquakes and singing animals and lights and colors and numbers. There are so many theories about Revelation. My mother, who suffers from migraines headaches, says that the shapes and colors that John describes sound just like the images she sees with migraines. A friend of mine is in a clinical study at Johns Hopkins about the effects of psilocybin, psychedelic mushrooms, on the spiritual lives of clergy people. His experience with medicinal mushrooms sounds a lot like what John described—rising up very high to see all of creation, hearing voices, swirling through a story that condenses time and place. So was John having a migraine? Did he have some sort of hallucinogenic experience? Or was his life just so awful that he imagined the most exotic experience he could dream up and called it heaven.

There he sat as a lonely prisoner on a rocky island, and he dreamed of something more.

John probably lived during the time of the Emperor Domitian. Domitian demanded that his subjects address him as "Lord and God." Many Christians refused to do that and so they were threatened and imprisoned. Maybe that's why John was exiled. Maybe John's life was so bad, so precarious, so full of fear and pain that he wrote this big, bold, bizarre story of heaven and earth to say, "I don't know what life is about, but I do know it is not this."

(Feel like that? Something more? Revelation not scary, hopeful.)

Broderick Greer is an Episcopal priest in Memphis. He is African American and he is gay. He has written powerfully about feeling excluded and outcast. He spoke to the Gay Christian Network earlier this year, and quoted the poet Lucille Clifton who wrote: “Come! // Celebrate with me that every day // Something has tried to kill me and has failed.” In his remarks, Greer described the ways in which he confronted the “somethings” that tried to kill him: racism, racists, hetero-patriarchal capitalistic theological constructs, abusive religious practices, violent armed thugs. And then he quoted the theologian James Alison to say, “I do theology as a matter of survival.” For Reverend Greer, the journey of life “has been the ebb and flow of life with God: desolation and consolation, life and death, oasis and wilderness. While some do theology from the perches of power and privilege,” he says, “Others of us do theology as a form of survival.”

I think that is why John of Patmos wrote this Book of Revelation. He needed to know that he mattered in the world, that he was included. Sure, he had some strange fantasies about what would happen to the powers of empire who stepped on others – and we will talk about those in the coming weeks. But I think mainly John was saying, Death and destruction and oppression and exclusion are not what God wants for creation. And so he sang this lovely hymn that we read together earlier: “I, John, saw with my eyes and heard with my ears the sounds of many messengers...Every creature you can imagine...thousands and thousands....” I think what John was saying is, “Hey, big bad empire... Hey oppressive military state... Hey, power-hungry people... You may want to beat me and kill me or put me in prison... But that is not God’s vision for creation... No! God is not separating us and exiling us. God is bringing us together in a huge song and

dance number... It's like Hamilton and half-time at the Super Bowl and Merle Haggard and the children's musical at church all mixed together."

"That's what God is about," John says, "Everything that is created—Everything in the sky and on the ground and under the ground and on the ocean and in the ocean—I heard all these things" singing and dancing...

And this is where the story gets funny. All of these creatures from everywhere are gathered around a throne. And there by the throne is a little lamb.

I've mentioned to some of you that I've been working to translate the Book of revelation from Greek into English. There are many good translations, and I am not a Greek scholar, but I wanted to see for myself as best I could what John wrote, without having to rely on other people's translations. And this is one of the things I came across. Here in Chapter 5, where John says all of these people were singing and worshipping and saying, "Praise and honor and greatness," most translations of the Bible say they were saying this, "to the Lamb." And some translations even capitalize "Lamb," even though ancient Greek didn't use capital letters. But John didn't really say, "Lamb." The koine Greek word for lamb was *arne*. What John used was *arnion*, which is a diminutive. We sometimes talk about Jesus as a lamb. Maybe you've seen art of this stern lamb. But what John said was that all of these people were gathered around a little lamb. Lambie might be the term we would use. Just like a little child carries a stuffed lamb maybe named Lambie. That's what everyone is focused on in John's vision. Which is really funny if you think about it.

There's the Emperor Domitian sitting on a golden throne surrounded by soldiers, trying to bend people to his will. Meanwhile, John says the purpose of life is to gather around a throne and sing a song to a lambie, a little lamb.

Think about the political rallies you've seen in the news lately. Speeches and harangues and finger-pointing and hateful signs. Imagine if all the Christians said, "Well, that's interesting, but we are going to stand outside in the parking lot and hold hands with strangers and sing songs to a lambie."

What John presents here is a completely alternative way to live, to be. A way that makes this life bigger than fear or pain or intimidation.

I asked you to imagine, earlier, heaven with streets of gold and alabaster walls and crystal seas and gates of pearl. That was John's vision—and one that captured the traditional imagination, and, though very specific, large enough for everything.

I have a different vision—one informed by John's revelation and the traditions of our faith, but also informed by science and our unfolding cosmology. Here's how I would describe heaven, or eternity—

One day, I will die. My family, or someone, I hope, will gather in this room or some such place. Perhaps they will say nice things about me—or perhaps they will tell the truth. Sing a few songs. Read a poem or maybe even some words from Revelation.

Then, I want someone to carry my earthly remains out to the Memorial Garden, or some other appropriate patch of ground, and pour my ashes into the earth. Pat down the soil on top of me and leave me there. And in God's good time, nature will have its way with me. And the oxygen and carbon and hydrogen and nitrogen and calcium that are me will

mingle with the nitrogen and calcium and phosphorous that are the saints of the ages and the rocks of ages and are already in the soil. And the roots of plants will reach down into me and draw up some kind of nourishment from me and through the sacred process of photosynthesis, those plants will release oxygen into the atmosphere. And that oxygen, fueled in part by my DNA, will give life to the universe. And my life will mingle with the lives of John and the rocks of Patmos and with Montessori-educated cows and with Jesus of Nazareth and even with the Emperor Domitian and with you and with all who came before us and with all who come after us. And we will all be one swirling, singing chorus of creation.

And for me, that is enough.

For a simple farm boy from East Texas to become an ongoing part of the universe, that is enough.

John, in his Revelation, said the same thing, using different words.

Our lives are not designed for prison and exile and oppression and loneliness.

We are created as part of everything.

Thanks be to God. Amen.