

Amen

This morning's passage picks up where last week's leaves off, so we are still in the throne room and all eyes are still on the throne. And on the one on the throne. And on that scroll. But just when we think we have a clear-ish picture of what John is describing, we hear that no creature is able to open the scroll, and John is overcome with weeping. Earlier the divine one has placed a hand on John's shoulder telling him not to be afraid. Now, one of the elders reassures John:

'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.'¹

I can almost feel John's sobs subsiding as he looks around for this worthy one: *Yes! A lion! That makes sense. One who is powerful and strong and brave is definitely worthy of the honor of opening this holy scroll.* Lions were a familiar sight around here, too, earlier this summer during Vacation Bible School as we were swept up in the story of Aslan from *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. We know what to expect when we look for a lion, and I like the comfort of knowing someone who resembles the king of the beasts is on my side, but just when I think I have this worthy one figured out, the picture shifts. And we are introduced to a Lamb. This is no ordinary lamb, but rather one who is "standing as if it had been slain." That is not an easy image to picture, not to mention the seven horns and seven eyes. Even if I am able to make sense of all that this picture entails, the fact remains that a lamb is not a lion—even one with multiple horns and eyes. And yet, this lamb is the worthy one, the powerful one. Against the backdrop of the

¹ Revelation 5:5

Roman Empire where might makes right and the strongest survive, John tells us that the only one worthy to stand in God's presence and open the scroll is not just Mary's little lamb, but a slaughtered lamb. It makes no sense at all.

And we want things to make sense. Or at least I do. Presbyterians in particular pride ourselves on being decent and orderly. We like things to follow a certain pattern, we like to make sense of things. So, I'm guessing that I'm not alone in wanting to figure out this Revelation puzzle, to fit all the pieces together into a nice and neatly finished project. I would like to make it all make sense. I want to make the world of Revelation fit into a world I can understand and grasp, to simplify the images into an allegory where each character, each image nicely and neatly matches one thing in my world. But no matter how hard I try, it doesn't work that way. What if this text is inviting me, inviting us not to analyze or pin down or make it make sense, but rather to imagine, to experience, to feel instead? To engage these holy images in a different way?

It will probably not come as a surprise that I have relished being on a stage of some sort since I was in middle school. I was Princess Pinkie in a play in seventh grade and Aladdin's mother in eighth. In high school I opted for dance over theater, but that still meant lights and a stage, and I loved it. My mother and I had a running bit where she would press me to use my inside voice and I would respond, "I am inside, so this is my inside voice." (She was a patient woman.) I have since joked that preaching allows me to use that not-so-inside voice for good—hopefully. Preachers are dangerously susceptible to big egos because we are easily tempted to think we are the star of the show, that being hams for Jesus is a good and even holy thing. I am grateful for this calling; I love what I am called to do. I am not and never have been the star of the show, however. There are all sorts of reasons for this, but most importantly it's because worship is not about me, nor is it a show...or is it?

Søren Kierkegaard was a Danish theologian and philosopher in the nineteenth century. Kierkegaard wrote about and wrestled with notions of faith and the church. Among his extensive writings, Kierkegaard challenged the conventional medieval concept of worship. He explored the image of worship as theater and criticized the notion that the congregation was the simply the audience, mere observers attending and consuming a performance. If we think of the sanctuary as a theater, it is tempting to think of God's being behind the scenes as the producer, and the worship leaders—preachers, liturgists, lay readers, and musicians—as the actors, and the congregation as the audience. Instead, Kierkegaard suggests that God is the audience, that the worship leaders are prompters helping everyone remember their lines, and that those in the pews are the actors performing and offering worship to and for God. While some have rightly pushed back, arguing that God is never simply passively receiving our worship,² I think Kierkegaard might be on to something deeply fundamental, something that sheds a new light on this scene in the throne room.

At no point do the four creatures or the angels in the throne room try to analyze or make sense of what is happening in front of them or around them. In response to the one on the throne and to the lamb, they fall down and worship. They sing. They do not simply watch from the sidelines or passively observe from a safe distance. They worship with their entire selves. And they say, "Amen."

At bible study on Wednesday, one of you commented, "That *amen* is important." Ours is not a tradition that lends itself to amen corners or out-loud dialogues with the preacher. I have preached in a few places where the amens came naturally and organically, and it was wonderful and affirming, if a bit unsettling. If nothing else, it told me that I had not put the congregation to

² <https://www.reformedworship.org/article/september-1994/whos-host-we-may-be-getting-carried-away-kierkegaards-analogy>

sleep. At best it signaled that something in my words resonated at a deeper level. That said, I do not typically expect to hear amens out loud in worship here except when the word comes at the end of a prayer we pray together.

There is a gift in those other *amens*, though, not just for the preacher but for all of us. According to Merriam-Webster, *amen* is “used to express solemn ratification ... or hearty approval.” (It is also in the top 2% of words looked up on their website.)³ It is thought to mean “so be it” or “may it be so.” *Amen* can be solemn or hearty. *Amen* can be whispered or shouted. *Amen* can be sung or offered in silence. I am certain that neither John nor the elders nor the four creatures nor the angels can fully fathom all that is happening before them. They do know that they are on holy ground, that the slaughtered lamb has changed everything, that the one on the throne will not let pain, heartbreak, or destruction have the final say. And the elders along with angels and creatures of every sort respond not with reasoned analysis but with worship, fully engaged worship. They sing and they say, “Amen.”

I’ve engaged in multiple discussions about the appropriateness of applause in church. I’m guessing you have, too. I want to be clear: I will not scold anyone for clapping in church. In our culture, clapping is one way we show our joy and our appreciation for what someone has offered. Clapping is an organic, out-loud expression of joy, and I am not one to stifle joy. I do think we could make a case for more *amens*, though. It’s not about boxing ourselves into an amen corner. But if I am to play my role faithfully as one who helps us remember our lines, maybe it would be good to remember and retrieve our *amens*.

When an anthem speaks to something words cannot, when a preacher speaks a truth I need to hear, when a worship leader prays a prayer that resonates deep within me, when a baby

³ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/amen>

squeals in the quiet, I can only say, “Amen.” When I try to fathom the immensity of the grace symbolized in a sprinkle of water, when I am awestruck by the abundance of the heavenly banquet when I break the bread and pour the cup, I can only say, “Amen.” *Amen* gives me another way to worship alongside listening, praying, reflecting, and wondering. It reminds me of an ancient line I did not know I had forgotten. *Amen* gives me a word when there are no words.

As I picture myself in that throne room, I am stunned and in awe of the power that stands before me. There I witness the one who is willing to suffer the worst humanity can come up with not for the sake of another world, but for this world, not for the sake of a perfect or particular people or race or clan, but for all of us. And I am speechless. Then the elders whisper a prompt in my ear, offering me a song to sing and a word to say: *Amen*. And it is then that I let down my guard, embrace the joy of that holy moment, and join in whole-hearted worship of the one who stands before me now and forever. I will never fully grasp all that that moment means or all that it contains. But this I do know: It is not about me. It never was and never will be. It is instead all about the one on the throne and that Lamb. Now and always.

Amen.