

Sheep and Lambs, Part II
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Revelation 7:9-17

⁹ After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. ¹⁰They cried out in a loud voice, saying,

‘Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!’

¹¹And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshipped God, ¹²singing,

‘Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom

and thanksgiving and honor

and power and might

be to our God for ever and ever! Amen.’

¹³ Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, ‘Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?’ ¹⁴I said to him, ‘Sir, you are the one that knows.’ Then he said to me, ‘These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

¹⁵ For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them.

¹⁶ They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat;

¹⁷ for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.’

John 10:22-30

²² At that time the festival of the Dedication took place in Jerusalem. It was winter, ²³and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the portico of Solomon. ²⁴So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, ‘How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.’ ²⁵Jesus answered, ‘I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father’s name testify to me; ²⁶but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. ²⁷My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. ²⁸I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. ²⁹What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father’s hand. ³⁰The Father and I are one.’

Our first reading, our reading from Revelation, is filled with things we would rather not think about, things spoken directly, like “great ordeal” and “the blood of the Lamb.” The reading also speaks indirectly in a way, using the negative to talk about the difficult things which will eventually be no more – hunger, thirst, scorching heat, heat which dries up water, heat which kills crops and animals and people. These are the things we wish were no more, and so a promise of life eternal, without them, is what we wish to hear. I don’t think I’m the only one who has ever wondered why we need experience them at all, nor the only one who has wondered why so much pain, especially when we know ones who seem to receive more than a “fair” share. I don’t think I’m the only one who has wondered “Why, God?”

For Monday’s Rebekah Circle, our presenter, Kathryn, shared many highlights from the small book given at Eastertime to our members who are at home. It’s a book called *Selections from One Thousand Gifts: Finding Joy in What Really Matters*, written by a woman named Ann Voskamp. I was taken by so much of what Kathryn shared, especially the writings on grief and loss, that I was preoccupied by it over the week. I decided I wanted to read the whole thing because I sensed connections with the readings for today, and because that would allow me to share some direct quotes with you. As sometimes happens, the Holy Spirit steps in and, while I thought I was purchasing the electronic version of the same book, I soon discovered that I had purchased the book from which the selections came, *One Thousand Gifts: A Dare to Live Fully Right Where You Are* – all 385 pages of it. To find what I remembered hearing, I would need to do more than flip a few pages and skim a few paragraphs. Like I said, the Holy Spirit stepped in, because reading the source book itself has been even richer.

It might be easy for someone who has lived an easy life to talk about finding joy. Ann Voskamp is not that someone. At the age of four, she, along with her mother, saw her younger sister crushed by a truck on the gravel road outside their farm. As an adult, she mourned with her husband’s brother the death of his two infant sons, just a year-and-a-half apart. Mourning children does not make for an easy life. And yet – or maybe because? – Ann wakes one morning from a nightmare centered on a terminal diagnosis and realizes she

wants more in whatever time she actually has in this life. As a woman of faith, she seeks answers in her Bible, and through the world around her. This book tells of what she observed, what she learned, what she realized.

They who have come out of the great ordeal spoken of in Revelation have endured persecution for the name of Christ; they are the ones now dressed in purest white, a color that can only be maintained by those who no longer toil, those who no longer struggle, those whose lives are not hard. Through their commitment to Jesus, and to the saving power of his death, his blood spilled, they have been granted rest from their toil, their struggles, their difficulties. Sometimes we read this and think, “If only I can trudge through this life, I can get to my reward of eternal life, and of rest, like those dressed in white.” And then we read of our humanity in Ecclesiastes, which says, “I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; moreover, it is God’s gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil”¹ and we wonder how these writings can be part of the same book. Did Jesus come that we may have life abundant in the hereafter?² Surely, not life abundant in the now? Do we only listen for our Shepherd’s voice so we might follow him to this better, distant place?³

Voskamp, on waking, realized she had been living in this way, living as though she would only get the fullness of what she “deserved” in the life to come and she wrote: “Though I can hardly whisper it, I live as though [God] stole what I consider rightly mine: happiest children, marriage of unending bliss, long, content death-defying days.”⁴ I live as though God stole what I consider rightly mine. I live as though God stole what I consider rightly mine. She comes soon after to a conclusion that “to find Eden, the abundance of Paradise, I’d need to forsake my non-*eucharisteo*, my bruised and bloodied ungrateful life, and grab hold to *eucharisteo*, a lifestyle of thanksgiving.”⁵ She speaks often of thanksgiving which

¹ Ecclesiastes 3:12-13.

² John 10:10.

³ John 10:27.

⁴ Ann Voskamp, *One Thousand Gifts: A Dare to Live Fully Right Where You Are* (Zondervan electronic publishing, 2011), iBook p. 15.

⁵ Ann Voskamp, *One Thousand Gifts: A Dare to Live Fully Right Where You Are* (Zondervan electronic publishing, 2011), iBook p. 48.

is followed by miracle, pointing again and again to that last supper where Jesus broke bread and **gave thanks**, all the while knowing a terrible death was imminent.

If you sit here and have trouble moving from a life in which it feels like what is rightly yours is missing, I understand. If you sit here and are offended at the implication that your life might be seen as ungrateful, I understand. Know that this book is the byproduct of a life transformed, and that things she can name now with ease are also named in comparison to her current life, a life with far more gratitude than before. On the path to this life of greater thanksgiving, she offers this: “I have lived pain, and my life can tell: I only deepen the wound of the world when I neglect to give thanks for early light dappled through leaves and the heavy perfume of wild roses in early July and the song of crickets on humid nights and the rivers that run and the stars that rise and the rain that falls and all the good things that a good God gives.”⁶ This is how we will not perish, as Jesus promises. The world will wound us, we will wound one another, we will wound ourselves but the wounds cannot deepen, so we cannot perish, if we give thanks for all the good things.

I’ve said before that we have not been promised easy lives or lives without pain, that nowhere in the Bible does God make that promise. We will ache and we will mourn because the wholeness of life is not whole without all parts of being, but that pain and that grief, as Paul reminds us, cannot separate us from the love of God, are not designed to separate us. We have open entry into God with thanksgiving, even in that which feels awful, and Voskamp reminds of the importance of the **practice** of giving thanks when she calls upon her newly forming discipline in the midst of a trauma one of her children experienced. She refers to it as the “hard discipline” and of it she says, “The *hard* discipline to lean into the ugly and whisper thanks to transfigure it into beauty.”⁷ Is this not what we do in this Eastertide? Do we not give thanks for, look at the beauty of, the ugly cross upon which our God died?

Our thanks-giving brings us directly to God, directly into God. Voskamp wonders, “How did I ever think there was another way to enter into [God’s] courts but with

⁶ Ibid, p. 84.

⁷ Ibid, p. 152.

thanksgiving?”⁸ Giving thanks is not the key but the doorway. Jesus says, “My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me.” His voice is one which gives thanks. When we follow him in giving thanks, no one can snatch us out of his hands. The wounds of the world cannot take us away from him while we are giving thanks. As Voskamp begins her journey, she says, “I want the hunt, the long sleuth, the careful piecing together. To learn how to be grateful and happy, whether hands full or hands empty.”⁹ This is not an overnight transformation for any of us, however, the more frequently we practice the discipline of giving thanks, the less the world’s wounds will take us away. Thanks be to God.

Let us pray: We offer you this prayer, giving God: thank you. Amen.

⁸ Ann Voskamp, *One Thousand Gifts: A Dare to Live Fully Right Where You Are* (Zondervan electronic publishing, 2011), iBook p. 88.

⁹ Ibid, p. 67.