

Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders.¹² In a loud voice they sang:

*“Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain,
to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength
and honor and glory and praise!”*

¹³ *Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, singing:*

*“To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb
be praise and honor and glory and power,
for ever and ever!”*

¹⁴ *The four living creatures said, “Amen,” and the elders fell down and worshiped. (Revelation 5:11-14)*

Worthy is the Lamb!

Are you worthy? We almost never get asked that question because we assume that everybody is. Before you disagree, what does the word “worthy” mean? It means that you deserve something. We believe that every child deserves a quality education. They’re all worthy of it. We believe that everybody deserves equal protection and equal rights. In fact, we even go so far as to say that everyone deserves a second chance. Every child who participates deserves some kind of award, even if it’s only a participation trophy. Every criminal deserves decent representation and so on. They are all worthy of those things. Even when we don’t think that someone deserves something, we might hesitate to say that they’re not worthy of it. But worthy means that someone deserves something. It can even be a negative thing. The men who condemned Jesus to die said, “He is worthy of death.” This is what he deserves. While we might not put it so pompously in our families, we could say, “This child is worthy of a spanking” or having their car keys taken away or whatever punishment is appropriate because they’re getting what they deserve. Today, the Apostle John gives us a glimpse of heaven. There he heard the angels singing, “Worthy is the Lamb!” Jesus deserves the praise he got.

I. Worthy is the Lamb because he was slain!

II. Worthy is the Lamb for all the world to praise!

I.

I’ve told you a number of times that the book of Revelation is a series of visions, a series of pictures that we’re supposed to study and understand. None of the pictures shows life as we know it. Rather, they show life exaggerated or turned upside down or combined with something unexpected. Revelation chapters four and five is no exception. At the heart of this picture is a throne with a man sitting on it. Lightning and thunder flash from the throne. The man on the throne is God the Father. In front of him are seven lampstands which represent the Holy Spirit. Next to the throne stands a Lamb who was slain and is alive again. This, of course, is Jesus.

Around the throne are four living creatures, with strange appearances. These four creatures are the hardest part of this picture. They appear to be high ranking angels. We tend to think of angels as having human appearance, but they don’t always in the Bible. Outside the four living creatures, there’s another, larger ring. 24 elders are seated on thrones around the center throne. They’re wearing crowns and singing God’s praises. They represent the twelve tribes of Israel and the twelve apostles – so the Church of both the Old and the New Testaments. Then outside this ring of elders stands a multitude of angels, **“numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand,”** John says. These are the angel hosts of heaven.

And what are those angels doing? They’re singing, **“Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!”** If you’re familiar with

Handel's *Messiah*, you've heard the way he imagined this great hymn sounds. But the truth is, we can't begin to imagine what all the angels of heaven singing in concert really sounded like.

Worthy is the Lamb! Worthy is Jesus! Why? Because he was slain. That's a little surprising, isn't it? At least, it would be, if we didn't already understand the picture. Jesus deserves all praise and glory and honor and power because of what he did. And what he did was die. Sometimes, I fear that we're so used to hearing that Jesus died for us that we fail to grasp just how nonsensical this sounds to ears that have no faith. Because he lost, because he died, he is worthy of all the trappings of victory! That runs against everything that we humans can ever come up with. It's a plan only God could have and only God could make work.

Jesus is worthy because he was slain. The Greek word really means slaughtered. Jesus was slaughtered on the cross as an offering to replace us. He died because we are not worthy. We like to think we are. All human beings believe that we're basically good and we deserve to go heaven. We go so far as to think that we deserve to be forgiven when we try hard to live as God wants us to live. But nothing could be farther from the truth. You see, God does something that runs counter to the way we think today. God holds us to his standard. This past week in Catechism Class, I was reviewing for the upcoming examination of confirmands. So, to make it more interesting for the kids, I divided the class into two teams and let them compete. I asked the question, "When did Jesus institute the Lord's Supper?" One of the kids answered, "On the night before he was betrayed." That answer was wrong. Do you know why? Jesus did not institute the Lord's Supper on the night before he was betrayed but on the night he was betrayed – the night before he died. The student in question insisted that he had given the right answer, and I truly believe he meant to. But he said it wrong. When I wouldn't give him the point, he felt that I was being unfair.

You might think so, too. It was a slip up. We'll have to agree to disagree about that. But if you think I should've given him that point, then you're very much in the mainstream of the way Americans think today. We always want to give second chances. Close is good enough. We all know what he meant to say. But God does not work that way with his law. God says, "Be perfect, just as I am perfect." He does not say, "Just do your best." He does not award us points for getting close. He says, "Be perfect." And anything less is a sin.

His punishment for sin is absolute: death followed by hell. That's what we all deserve because the best you can do isn't even close to what God demands – being totally perfect. If you think that you can stand on your best efforts and that's going to be OK, then you really need to spend some time learning what God actually demands from you. You will find that he will judge your thoughts and feelings just as much as your words and your deeds. He condemns wanting to sin, even if you never do it. You will find that in his sight, there is nothing good about you at all. You can only earn hell.

We're not worthy. But Jesus was. He lived exactly the life God calls us to live. Then he died. God sacrificed him in our place to pay for all that we're guilty of. Jesus' own love drove him to be that sacrifice. That makes him worthy – far more worthy than any of us could ever be. His love makes him worthy of all the praise of all the saints and all the angels forever. Worthy is the Lamb who was slain. But who is no longer dead. When he rose, God said that all that we're guilty of is now paid for. Jesus' victory over death and hell makes him worthy. He didn't just come close to freeing us from sin and death. He didn't just give it his best shot. He wasn't just excellent or great. He was perfect. And he won. He crushed the devil. He paid for every sin. And God raised him to say that all his justice is satisfied for the entire race of men. Worthy is the Lamb, because we are not. Worthy is the Lamb who took our place. **Worthy is the Lamb because he was slain!** And now he has risen!

II.

So the angels sing praise to Jesus. And guess who answers? You do. John heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea praising Jesus and saying, "**To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!**" The whole of creation praises Jesus. And the elders – the Church – falls down and answers, "Amen!" And you all know what "amen" means, don't you? It means, "Yes! So shall it be!" It's an Aramaic word which expresses agreement with whatever is being said.

When is this going to happen? Clearly, it's not happening right now. The created world is in slavery to sin and St. Paul tells us in Romans that it's groaning with longing to be freed. The people who make up the world around us are born in sin, born worthy of hell. Most of them manage to get through life without ever coming to faith in Christ. So they have no real praise of Jesus here.

But the day is coming when all the world will praise the Lamb who was slain. On Judgment Day, creation will be freed from slavery to sin. The world will be restored and perfected and cleansed of all that sin has done to it. It will once again sing – perhaps not with a voice, but all that is will praise Christ the Creator and Redeemer of the world. And on that day, all people will sing Jesus' praise. It won't matter how many times his enemies denied Jesus during their life here. It won't matter how often they cursed and swore and abused our Lord's name. On Judgment Day, they will sing his praises. And before they go to hell, the Church will answer with its own "amen." And then it will pick up the refrain and praise the Lamb forever.

But do we want to wait until then? What Jesus did for us changes our lives already. Is there anyone more deserving of praise from us than he is? Obviously not. But are we willing to open our mouths and praise him? I think that we live in a tough time to do that. Today, people don't sing at all. Our ancestors sang while they worked and when they got together in all kinds of social settings. They didn't worry about how their voices sounded. But today's world, with its high definition sound reproduction and its sensitivity to public mockery has reduced most of us to singing only when we sing along with our ipod or our MP3 player and then only if no one's around to hear us. Some of us never lift up our voices in church to sing to the Lord. Why not? When I ask people, the two most common answers are: They don't like or don't know the hymns I pick. They have terrible voices and you don't want them to sing.

But singing praise to the Lord is a natural outgrowth of knowing the Lord. He is worthy of praise and honor from us, his children. You know how Christ has set you free from death and hell. In this Easter season especially, lift up your voice as if you were already in heaven!

Of course, singing is not the only way that we praise Jesus. Everything we do because we are his children sings his praises. When the Lord returns, we'll be perfect and everything that we do will praise him. And you know what? Nothing will make us happier than to serve God. Even in this life, we see that. Sometimes, we say that someone is born to play football or teach or whatever. When they do that, they feel fulfilled because they're being what God designed them to be. God designed all of us to be his servants. When we serve him, we're living according to what we really are. And even in this life with all the opposition that sin brings against living for God, we are never more content than when we live as the servants he made us to be.

We can't be happy when our life is all about getting things here. We can't be happy when our gods are money or popularity or lifestyle. When that's true of us, we're no longer praising God, but ourselves. It's a sad truth of this life, but the things we often spend the most time pursuing are the things that make us the least happy. But serving God with our lives is different. That means living in love for God first of all and also for each other. It means helping and serving one another. And the truth is, when we lift each other up because we're God's people and we want to help each other, we feel joy. That life is a life of praise.

That life is ours because we know our Savior. Maybe, you don't believe you've lived that life up til now. You're probably right. We're sinners and we all have room to grow in this serving God every single day. And I can't make you feel better about your failures by telling you to try harder. But Jesus died for all the failures in our lives and in our praise. Jesus rose because we sinners do such a lousy job of praising him. Jesus has wiped away our faulty, weak praise. He's replaced it all with his perfect praise for God his Father.

Now, because we are forgiven, he calls us to sing a new song of praise. He calls us to sing with our lives and to sing with our hearts. He calls us to lift up our voices here because we belong to him. **Worthy is the Lamb for all the world to praise him!** That's what we're going to do in heaven forever. Why not start practicing right here and now? Amen.