

## START AT THE ENDING: THE BOOK OF REVELATION

### *The Lamb is Shepherd*

Revelation 7:9-17

February 1, 2026

Some Sundays back in seminary, I would slip into the back pew of Oakhurst Presbyterian Church. Oakhurst was and is a powerful presence in its Atlanta neighborhood. For generations now, a multiracial congregation with deep roots—a hundred years in that place—and a broad reach across metro Atlanta. If I'm honest, I mostly went because there was a pastoral intern there named Sara Hayden, and I was eager for any excuse to see her. But once in the pews, the witness and worship of that community captivated me.

The pastor's name was Nibs. Nibs had been at Oakhurst for decades, and Nibs had John the Baptist vibes. He was a voice crying in the wilderness. Nibs baptized a lot of babies in that church in the decades of his ministry, and I was blessed to witness several of those baptisms. And every time he did it, he performed a sort of holy subversion right there in the sanctuary. After the water and the words, he would lift the child—carefully, the way you hold something precious—and then he would start to walk. Slowly. Up that sanctuary's center aisle, toward the oak doors, at the back of the room, and then he would turn and walk back toward the font. And as he walked, Nibs would talk. The congregation would listen in, but Nibs wasn't speaking to us. He was looking right into the eyes of that infant he had baptized, and here is what he would say.

"Little one, this world is going to hand you a script."

And he'd keep walking, his shoes echoing on that aged hardwood.

"And here's what that script is going to tell you. It's going to tell you who you are. It's going to tell you what your life is for. That script will tell you to dominate. It will tell you to fight. It will tell you to win. Tell you to look out for

yourself and step on whoever you need to step on. The world's script will say your worth is what you produce, your safety is what you defend, your identity is what you can take."

After a pause, he'd continue. "But today, little one, we tell you something different, something older, something truer. Today we mark you with a name this world did not give you and cannot take from you. Child of God. You belong to Jesus. And nothing in this world can separate you from his love."

I never once made it through that walk with dry eyes. It wasn't just the beauty of the baby; it was the weight of the words. He was putting the world on notice. He was reclaiming a stolen identity before the other voices had a chance to start their screaming.

Friends, those voices are screaming now. It is a time of monsters.

John of Patmos heard them. In John's vision, the voices of this world don't just whisper polite suggestions about how we ought to live to get by in the world. They roar in Revelation. Those monsters have teeth. Revelation is a book of monsters. There are dragons with seven heads. Beasts of the sea with ten horns and names that sound like curses.

To the Christians huddled in the back alleys of the Roman Empire, these were not scary stories to tell at night; they were the evening news every night. The dragon was the magistrate demanding you bow to Caesar. The beast was an economy that crushed you if you didn't have the right mark on your hand.

They still scream, these voices, don't they? They speak into the quiet places of our pragmatism, urging an

acquiescence to the cold reality of a pre-loaded script that the world is governed by force, that the world runs on power. *And that's just the way it works.*

But in Revelation, this is the Liturgy of the Dragon. It says power is the only real thing. Strength is the only real way. You must bow or be broken.

I call it a liturgy because that's what it is. It's a kind of catechesis—it's a spiritual training, a formation, a script. It happens slowly, over the years, as we are taught to equate faithfulness with dominance, or to hear political slogans as moral guidance, or to see beloved neighbors as outside threats. The heart can turn to stone so gradually in our lives that we don't even notice the change.

And that's why we need to be here. That's why we need to worship. That's why we need a different script and a new vision. It's why we gather at the font to tell a truer story.

John names something we must hear. John sees a multitude standing before the throne. He names them. They are people from every nation. They are people who speak every language. Their common thread is that they have come through the Great Ordeal together. The Greek word here is *thlipsis*. Its most common usage is to describe what happens to grapes when you make wine. Pressure. This is not regrettable inconvenience or mild annoyance. Just ask the grape. What John describes is a crushing pressure. The kind that breaks families apart. The kind that makes people afraid to leave their homes. The kind that turns neighborhoods into occupied territory.

John will not let us look away from the Great Ordeal, from the *thlipsis*, the pressure. He instructs us to look all the way through it—to those who have come out on the other side, who are standing there along with the one who led them through it.

Earlier this week, I was on a call with pastors from all over the country, organized by a friend of mine, a former Lake Fellow here, Sarah Brouwer, who now serves a church in Minneapolis. They are not debating headlines.

They are talking of neighbors. People they see in grocery stores. Families whose kids go to school with their kids. This is what *thlipsis* looks like up close. It has a face. It has a name. The dragon wants us to forget this truth—to see categories and not neighbors with faces and souls.

The dragon asks us to accept a script of overwhelming force, and we must not.

It is Jesus who shows us the way. It was Jesus who took the script he'd been handed and turned it upside down. Jesus who said, "You have heard it said... but I say to you..." *You have heard an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, but I say to you turn the other cheek. You have heard it said you should love your neighbor and hate your enemy, but I say love your enemy and pray for those who persecute you.*

This isn't weakness. It is refusal to let his enemies dictate the terms of his life. The dragon says: *you must match fury with fury, or you lose.* Jesus says: *when you match fury with fury, you have already lost.*

I remind you, Jesus never promised it would be easy, this being formed in a way the world can't quite get. And that is why we return to the water. In times of cruelty and the Great Ordeal, the Church has always come back to the truth spoken at our baptism. We return not for comfort, but for clarity.

Because in baptism, we see what John saw. We declare that the "iron laws" of the world are merely a façade, that in this book of monsters, there is another creature. He keeps showing up in the most surprising places and the most unusual times. This Lamb. The kind of animal that ends up on a dinner plate, not a throne. And yet, in John's vision, here he is, right at the center of the universe.

To anyone who has paid attention to how power actually works, it's a joke. You need a lion on that throne, a god who will crush our enemies, match fire with fire, win the way the world wins. But John has seen something the Roman Empire cannot fathom. He has seen that the Lamb was slaughtered—and yet, there he is, standing. On the throne. At the center.

John knows that the Lamb's gentleness is not to be overcome. It is the victory itself. He conquers not by becoming a dragon, but by remaining a Lamb. This holy stubbornness—this refusal to let the world's cruelty change the shape of his heart. John knows that you don't defeat the beast by out-beasting it. You defeat it by absorbing the worst and still standing.

John looks out and sees a multitude that no one could count. Every nation, every tribe, every people, every language. Standing together before the throne. He knows that Rome built its peace by forced sameness—you must submit or disappear. But in the Kingdom of the Lamb, the things the world used to divide us are revealed as God's own source of joy. In the kingdom, our languages are not erased; they are understood.

Now, there is a voice—maybe you've heard it—that says the Lamb is no answer for the threats we face. *Not now. Now we need a lion. Mercy is a luxury we cannot afford. It's time to fight fire with fire.*

And that voice can sound like wisdom in a time of monsters. That voice can sound like survival when the pressure is crushing. The *thlipsis* is upon us. But it is the dragon's voice. And it is using your fear against you. Friends, you must not become what God demands you resist.

John offers this warning: The scariest beast in Revelation is not the dragon. It is the one in Chapter 13 with two horns that looks like a lamb. It appears as a lamb but has the voice of a dragon. And that's the real terror. Not the one you see coming, but the one wearing the face of what you love.

You see, the Dragon is not just "out there." Sometimes it is "in here," deep in our hearts. Sometimes it speaks through us, using our symbols and scriptures to justify its hunger. This is why Christ must always be greater than our Christianity.

Friends, listen for the dehumanization. That's always the tell. When someone calls a child of God demonic or a parasite or vermin—while claiming to speak for Jesus—that is the Dragon's speech in lamb's clothing.

Friends, we have another liturgy. We have this font. We have a counter-catechesis. It begins with renunciation.

We renounce the iron laws of force. We renounce the lie that our safety requires our neighbor's suffering. We renounce the speech of the dragon, even when it comes from a pulpit. We renounce any faith that values winning over witnessing.

For we have one Lord. One. Not power and Christ. Not empire and Christ. The Lamb alone.

Listen. The world has handed you a script. It tries to train your heart for warfare and your mind for suspicion. It tries to convince you that only the destroyers are saved from destruction. But you have been washed in the water of a deeper truth. You are marked with a name no leader can grant and no authority can revoke.

You do not belong to the dragon, to the lie, to the screaming voices of cruelty and chaos that claim to hold your soul. You do not belong to the fear. You do not belong to the hatred. You do not belong to the violence and its false promise of security.

You belong to God.

The iron laws will break. The dragons will all fall. The Lamb will be standing still. The Lamb is our Lord. The Lord is our shepherd. Amen.