

March 14 is National Pi Day and sadly it has nothing to do with my favorite dessert. **I learned about “pi” (the number 3.14159) in high school Algebra class and I’m sure all mathematicians recognize the term.** It’s a term that cannot be expressed exactly as a fraction because it never settles into a permanent repeating pattern. It has a nonrepeating sequence of numbers that has been calculated out to 67,000 digits with each digit representing just the slightest increase in precision.

I think we may be living in the “age of pi,” the age of the pursuing an ever-greater precision in human knowledge. That’s why it sounds odd to hear Albert Einstein say: “Knowledge is limited. [But] imagination encircles the world.”

The “age of pi” has also influenced the way we read and interpret the Bible, poring over every word in search of greater and greater historical, linguistic, and theological precision. From this type of precision come the boundaries and battlegrounds of Christian denominations, a differentiation that in 2,000 years has produced over 45,000 denominations globally.

In this world of unceasing sound and noise we wonder if every voice that we hear is the voice of God? Well, of course not. But then how do we distinguish God’s voice from all other voices? The Book of Revelation is part of the Bible that is difficult to read from a “pi” perspective, slicing its verses ever more thinly in pursuit of precise dates, times, and meanings in the constant search for cross-references to today’s timetables and calendars. The engineers in our congregation are probably fascinated by all of this. But I believe the Bible employs an astonishing variety of literary styles to paint a panorama of God’s wondrous good news. *Metaphor* is one of its most important figures of speech in Revelation.

Dave Peterson explains that the word *metaphor* means “that which carries you across.” So, we ought to find it helpful to be carried across the Book of Revelation *on the wings of metaphor*. Setting aside logic and analytics for poetry and metaphor, we can get absorbed in the sounds, the flashing spectrum

of colors, things known and unknown, voices speaking like harmonic instruments, and the infinite rotation of every good and beautiful thing around a central figure whose presence is covered in light and sound.

It's easy to miss the precise meaning of seals and scrolls, of harps and golden bowls of incense, here in chapter 5, if we're looking for precise measurements and empirical facts. Instead, the “pi” of God stretches our souls. Revelation 4 depicts God’s throne, saying, “*The twenty-four elders fall down before him who sits on the throne, and worship him who lives for ever and ever. They lay their crowns before the throne and say: “You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being”* (vv. 10-11). That leaves me humming the line from our opening hymn, “*Holy! Holy! Holy! Lord God Almighty!*” that says, “*All the Saints adore thee, casting down their golden crowns around the glassy sea.*”

Revelation is at the end of the Bible, but I believe it is the theological center of the Bible’s story. The Lamb has the scroll! But what exactly is the scroll? The devil doesn’t have it. The Roman emperor doesn’t have it. Is it the scroll of Creation? Of all human history? It is Jesus Christ who holds all history in his hand and, therefore, whatever fears we may have about life or death must be influenced by the Lamb. **The one to fear is the Lamb, as John the Baptist announces him in the gospel, saying, “Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!”** Then, in Romans 8 Paul makes a similar claim: “*Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us.*” **This is the Lamb, according to Paul. That is, only Jesus Christ, the living Word, has the right to speak the last word. Only he is worthy of our worship!**

In Revelation 5 there’s another song that is sung and all of heaven rejoices. “*Thousands upon thousands, and ten thousands time ten thousands*” (v. 11) sing this chorus of praise! The numerical description in the Greek idiom is constructed in a way to discourage the precise numbering of this vast myriad of people. The sense of the word is of *a number beyond counting!* **The number**

for pi, 3.14159, doesn't end. It keeps on going in 67,000 nonrepeating digits. The number of those who worship the Lamb also keeps on going, on and on, and on.

But John has his eyes on the Lamb, not on the huge crowd. What these worshipers sing to the Lamb is very important. The song is titled *a new song* in verse 9. The phrase “a new song” has deep roots in Old Testament Messianic psalms. David sings these words in Psalm 144: “*I will sing a new song to thee, O God; upon a ten-stringed harp I will play to thee, who gives victory to kings, who rescues David thy servant*” (v. 9). And then in Psalm 96: “*O sing to the Lord a new song...tell of his salvation from day to day...*” (vv. 1-2).

The word “new” has the connotation of a surprising gift of life and hope in the face of the evil and danger of this world. The word “new” also becomes part of the fulfillment of Revelation’s worship scene. The yearnings of David and the other Psalm writers are now *fulfilled*. This new song of Revelation 5, first of all, praises God that the Lamb is worthy to hold history and to open up history’s meaning in the scroll. The chorus gives thanks because redemption has been won by the life of Jesus that was given.

The NRSV uses the word “ransomed” in this verse, a word that I prefer, instead of the word “purchased” used in the NIV. This word implies securing the release of a slave. The song identifies those who have been *ransomed* as people coming from every “*tribe and language and people and nation*” (v. 9). **The universal impact of salvation through Christ is nowhere in the New Testament more dramatically announced. Christ has made this worldwide fellowship a “*kingdom and priests to serve our God*” (v. 10).** These two words were earlier used to describe God’s people in chapter 1 of Revelation. The final chorus is an exalted affirmation of the worth and authority of Jesus Christ the Lamb. And the song ends with the entire creation joining in praise. The very last sound is a wondrous “Amen.”

Seven-year-old Benjy’s father asked him what he liked most about church. Benjy thought for a moment and he answered, “The Benediction.” Now there’s

an honest sentiment for Pastor Appreciation month! I also know some adults who like to read the end of the story before they even begin reading a novel, so they know how it turns out. Speaking of endings, I can think of no single musical work as compelling and grand as George Frederick Handel's "Worthy Is the Lamb" at the end of his oratorio *The Messiah*. It seems that Handel has caught the surprise and joy of this biblical vision—the exciting incongruity of it all—the mighty Lion who is also the little Lamb—the Lamb, despised and rejected, hung on a cross at Calvary, now victorious and deservedly honored.

God is so sure of himself that he came in humility. He became small enough to share our lives. As Augustine put it, "Proud humans would have died had not a lowly God found them." How right it is that we praise the Lamb in worship, like the throngs of heaven. History is not as ominous and frightful as it once seemed because of this worship scene. Whatever may come, we have met the One who gives, not only our lives but all human history its meaning. And we must not forget this worship song in the journey ahead as the seven seals are opened one by one. The Lamb has won the battle over evil and death.

Today, I want us to remember that every New Testament writer had a strong conviction that the sum of human history finds its meaning, its convergence point, in the conquering Lion who is also the sacrificial Lamb. He is the critical center from which all the parts make sense and in which all the parts converge. C. S. Lewis expresses this theological center by means of a literary analogy:

"Let us suppose we possess parts of a novel. Someone now brings us a newly discovered piece of manuscript and says, 'This is the missing part of the work. This is the chapter on which the whole plot of the novel really turns.' The new passage, if not genuine, would become harder and harder to reconcile with the rest of the story...But if it is genuine, then at every fresh reading of the book, we will find it settling down, making itself more at home, and bringing significance from all sorts of details in the whole work which we had previously missed. We must do something like this with the Incarnation of Jesus Christ."

Instead of a novel, Revelation 5 has the whole mass of knowledge in a *scroll*. “Who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll?” asks a mighty angel. Poor John weeps and weeps because he is afraid the scroll will never be opened. **The credibility of the scroll depends on the extent to which it illuminates and integrates the whole story, even if we can’t fully comprehend it.** As C.S. Lewis also said, “We believe that the sun is in the sky at midday in summer not because we can clearly see the sun (in fact, we cannot) but because we can see everything else.”

I titled today’s sermon “*The Practice of Worship*” to emphasize that worship is vitally important as a way of *practicing* our faith. It is a way of *practicing* praying and *practicing* serving and *practicing* singing and *practicing* giving. So, the worship scene depicted by John’s Apocalypse reminds me that worship here on earth is a nonrepeating sequence of numbers that has been calculated out to 67,000 digits with each digit representing just the slightest increase in precision—like pi. **Our worship is never perfect. It is indeed *practice* for what is to come in heaven, when we worship with an infinite throng before God’s throne, when our worship reaches perfection.**

On the highway the other day I saw a vanity license plate in all caps that spelled PERFCET. I got the joke. Perfect performances, when it comes to human activities (license plates, as well as worship), do not happen here on earth because we are totally imperfect creatures. The covenant renewal aspect of worship that I spoke about last Sunday means that worship is not entirely up to us. **Christ’s saving work as the Lion and the Lamb established the new covenant we have with God through his Son. He is the one who is “Worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals” (v. 9). He is the only one worthy of our worship.** We could never engineer or produce perfect worship, because *the practice of worship* itself is God’s gift to us through Jesus Christ. Imperfect as it may be, let us worship the Lord and glorify his holy name!

“To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!” (v. 13) Amen.