

***Pulling Back the Curtain***  
***Revelation 5:11-14***  
***May 5, 2019***

In his book, **What we Talk about when we Talk about God**, Rob Bell relates the story a woman told him when he was speaking in Boston. A woman came to him after his talk and told him the story of her night in the hospital. She was there for ongoing cancer treatment and was lying in bed feeling really despairing about her future. She had hit the lowest point in her life, and thought she was going to die. Suddenly the night nurse came in and began to care for her in a most loving way. Throughout the night the nurse returned again and again, calming her, reassuring her and lifting her spirits and gave her real hope. In the morning she woke up feeling like a different person and asked the morning nurse for the name of the woman who had been so kind to her during the night. She gave her a detailed description of the night nurse. But the nurse said that her description didn't fit anyone on that floor of the hospital, and certainly not the night before in the woman's room. So Rob asks, *what do you do with that story?* Who could that night nurse have been? An angel?

We are like the fish that swim in the water but don't really think too much about the water. It's where they live and breath, from the time they are born until the day they die, or are prematurely pulled out of the water by eager fishermen. Water is their natural environment. We too swim in an environment we scarcely think about called the ***Enlightenment***. It has been the sea we were born in and have been swimming in all our lives. And most of the time we don't even notice it. But it is there all along, shaping our decisions, our views on life, on death, on God, and on what constitutes reality and certainty.

But we have even moved beyond this! In her book, ***The Great Emergence***, Phyllis Tickle argues that we are in a post-Enlightenment world now. She reminds us that between Einstein and Heisenberg we have moved into a new world of meaning. The uncertainty principle Heisenberg developed in the lab now colors our thinking. There is no absolute truth for the perceivers. We once, along with Newton and Descartes could unlock all the mysteries of how the universe works. Descartes famous saying exploded how we come to knowledge: *I think therefore I am*. Until he came along we believed

that everything we knew came from revelation or what God told us. Descartes said no, our knowledge is arrived at through the exercise of reason and logic. But it also restricted our knowledge to that which is proven by the scientific method. Reason, logic, testing were now the only way to certain knowledge. But now after Heisenberg we are in a world of even more uncertainty.

For the woman who experienced the visit of the night nurse to all our experiences that cannot be subjected to the science lab: falling in love, being moved by a song, feeling the hum of reverence within us: all this mysterious, spiritual experience is often more real to us than the distance across the milky way, and yet apparently not provable and therefore uncertain. Like the fish, we've been swimming in this sea of post-enlightenment, but we find ourselves uncertain on how to reconcile our spiritual experiences with today's climate of thought.

Rob Bell tells us about a German word that is used when we talk about God who is beyond conventional means of analysis and description. It speaks of the kind of faith that sees science and faith as dance partners, not enemies. The word is ***grenzbegriff***. He says: *When I'm talking about God, I'm talking about your intuitive sense that reality at its deepest flows from the God who is ***grenzbegriff***.*

With this in mind let's turn to our reading from Revelation. We enter with John through the trapdoor into the other dimension of reality. It is a world, not as different from ours as we might think. Let's recap first, just how unpredictable and weird our physical universe really is. Modern science tells us that it is made up of atoms and all sorts of subatomic particles whose behaviour is surprising and unpredictable. Atoms, the building blocks of the universe, are apparently 99.9 % empty space. So if we took all the empty space from all the atoms in the universe, it would fit into a sugar cube. That's how weird our universe is. And by the way 80% is unknown. Wrong! Apparently 96% is made up of black holes, dark matter and dark energy. Who knew??

Even time is illusionary. It is not linear but rather curved and relative. So entering John's vision of the throne room might to our post-enlightenment way of thinking seem like dropping down the rabbit hole of Alice and Wonderland. But then we respond from that deep hum of reverence within us and realize this vision may just be as real

as the world of quarks, leptons and the Higgs Boson particle, or as it is often called, the god particle. The reality is that the line we tend to draw between the spiritual and material is not a line at all. The universe we live in is just as weird as the world of John's vision and they are intimately interrelated.

Second, we need to remember also that the world of John was the world of the Emperor Domitian who was described as *a thoroughly nasty person, rarely polite, insolent, arrogant and cruel*. So hated was he that after his murder the Senate ordered that all evidence of his life be destroyed. After the revolt of the Jews and the destruction of the temple in 70 AD Domitian pursued a program of persecution and death to Jews and Christians. There were many Christian martyrs during his reign from 81 to 96 AD. John's letter was written to Christians living in this fearful, dangerous time. And it is a call to resistance and hope. John sang a song about who is in charge of the world. It is not Domitian, but Jesus Christ, the little lamb slain for our sins and raised from the dead. John portrays Jesus, not as a fierce, apocalyptic lion, but as a slaughtered little lamb. So we enter the throne room on which God reigns. In short, readers and hearers of my vision, Domitian doesn't reign, God does.

John's throne room of the universe has every living thing represented: *every living creature in heaven and on earth, and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them singing: To the one seated on the throne and to the lamb be blessing and honour and glory and might.*

When we pull back the curtain that separates us from the invisible dimension all around us, it is not like Dorothy and friends, who, when they pull the curtain aside, discover that the one feared is just an ordinary man who has no power. His power has been an illusion. Behind the curtain in John's vision it is no illusion. The one on the throne is truly worthy of our love and worship. He is the lamb slain for us, who is alive and who is in control of every atom in our bodies, and in the stars. He is the one, Paul reminds us, who holds everything together by the word of his power. That entire invisible world we cannot see, the world of subatomic particles, shifting, moving, changing, is in his control. It is the world of matter he was instrumental in bringing into being, perhaps by the big bang, where

the universe in a sugar cube began its expansion into the vast universe science explores today.

The response is song. They sing their hearts out.

So what is its message for your and me? Let's bring into the circle the things that trouble us: health, relationships, work, our uncertainties about our future, our hurts and our guilt about the past, our hundred and one things that sometimes rob us of sleep. John's vision reminds us that God is truly in control of our universe and God's loving, active concern is for each of his creatures. There is no part of our lives that escapes God's attention and care. The one behind the curtain is in control.

***Amen***