**First Presbyterian Church of Pittsford**



**April 10, 2016**

**Iceberg**

**Acts 9:1-6**

**Revelation 5:11-14**

**John 21:1-19**

1. Iceberg – dead ahead!!!
	1. A hundred and four years ago tomorrow night, the ‘unsinkable’ Titanic hit an iceberg and began its slow descent into the depths of the frigid North Atlantic Sea.
		1. This was NOT expected.
	2. The Titanic had been constructed using the latest technology.
		1. Her crew were top notch
		2. Her accommodations were lavish and appointments were top drawer
		3. Her passengers were A-list including the Astors, Guggenheims and Strauses as well as the unsinkable Molly Brown.
			1. For those of you who love the film-maker James Cameron, I hate to break it to you, but the passenger list did not include Jack Dawson and Rose DeWitt.
	3. What went wrong?
		1. Everyone expected invincibility.
			1. Power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing belong to the White Star line.
			2. Might makes right – right?
				1. Our New Testament Lesson for today says otherwise.
2. Revelation is artful and full of rich symbolism.
	1. Its twenty-two chapters spark constant curiosity and still speak to us today.
		1. No other book of the Bible has spawned so many well-loved hymns like our very first hymn in the Glory to God hymnal, “Holy, Holy, Holy” and Handel’s “Hallelujah” chorus.
		2. It is a wonderfully Christ-centered book, full of worship and praise.
	2. Contrary to the recent fictional portrayal of Revelation in which much of humanity is apocalyptically LEFT BEHIND, we can artfully interpret together Revelation’s relevant lesson for each of us today.
		1. If you wish, follow along with me on pages 233 or 248 in your pew bibles.
	3. This lectionary passage is actually two hymns sung first to the Lamb that was slaughtered (v.12) and secondly, to God and to the Lamb (v.13).
	4. The scene occurs in the heavenly throne room, to which John was transported a chapter earlier (4:1).
		1. The heavenly court includes God, seated upon the throne and surrounded by four living creatures and twenty-four elders.
			1. Pay attention Presbyterians!
				1. We are in the book of Revelation by name. (v.14)
				2. The Greek word for elder is *presbuteros* from which we get Presbyterian.
		2. The scene concludes when the Lamb opens the first seal (6:1), unveiling the eschatological sequence of seals, trumpets, and bowls.
			1. The oft-fabled horsemen of the apocalypse appear in Chapter 6 and are revealed to be under the authority of the lamb.
	5. This is the Lamb’s first appearance in Revelation and this is significant for two reasons:
		1. First, the lamb has won the authority to unseal the scroll of destiny.
			1. In the first 10 verses of Chapter 5 from before today’s reading, John laments the absence of anyone with adequate authority to open the seven seals on the scroll of history.
				1. And why is this so important?

Would you like to know the future?

Imagine having even more power than Janet Yellen to turn the stock market in any direction.

Opening the seals on the scroll of history reveals creation’s final destiny.

Luke, it is your destiny…

* + - 1. John’s weeping ends only when he turns to see “the Lion of the Tribe of Judah” who has conquered all.
				1. John sees this lion earlier in Chapter 5 just before today’s reading.
				2. Surely this lion will be the one to open the seals and reveal humanity’s destiny.

That’s the way it happens in the movies, isn’t it?

This must be strong Aslan, from the *Chronicles of Narnia*, here to right all that was wrong!

* + - * 1. John has a different vision.

Chapter 5 verse 6 says, “Then I saw between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders (Presbyterians) a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered…**he** went and took the scroll.

* + - * 1. This was NOT expected.
	1. Now for the second important thing about the lamb’s appearance in Revelation:
		1. The lamb’s unique capability to wield this authority came about not by might, but by ransoming humanity through its own death.
			1. This is the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.
				1. This is the Passover Lamb. (Exodus 12:3, 5-8 and 12-13)

The lamb’s blood smeared on the lintels meant death passed over that house.

Without the lamb, no Israelite left Egypt alive.

* + - * 1. This lamb is both food and a mark of salvation.
			1. The Greek word John uses here for lamb (arnion) is actually a diminutive form better translated not as lamb but as ‘lambkin’ suggesting great vulnerability.
				1. This little lambkin was slaughtered and he, not the Lion of Judah, is worthy to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing.
				2. The lambkin is worthy to receive seven things, not six, not eight – but seven, because seven is a perfect number symbolizing all – the totality of existence.

*By the way, why is six afraid of seven?*

*Because seven ate nine.*

* + - * 1. The Greek in our bibles does not have punctuation but it does have all these ‘ands’.

This is the Greek equivalent of bolding, highlighting, word art formatting and neon paint saying, pay attention!

This is NOT expected.

* 1. Revelation’s hymns unexpectedly reveal that worship is central to our identity and mission as God’s people.
		1. You might have noticed that our Worship and Music Committee has recently been asking for feedback on our Worship experiences.
			1. Our participation in worshiping God is important because worship publicly prioritizes that which is worthy – God.
		2. Worship dismisses competing claims upon our energy, enthusiasm, intelligence and love.
			1. How?
			2. 1st, Choosing church attendance means prioritizing time for God.
				1. Other pursuits such as volunteering, education, athletics, and fellowship are also important.
				2. All of these wonderful things are enhanced when infused with a God-centered perspective.
			3. 2nd, Claiming Christ as Lord and Savior means repudiating any other master;
				1. Be it economic, emotional, or ephemeral.
			4. 3rd, Showing servant leadership through the power of the Spirit means not expecting others to make the world a better place.
				1. We get to make the world a better place.
				2. We do not need to complain.
				3. We have the opportunity and joy of changing.
			5. 4th, Confessing Christ banishes blaming others for our lot in life.
				1. We are not victims!
			6. 5th, Partaking in sacraments reminds us that life includes mystery and occurrences beyond our control.
				1. Practicing mystery makes the unknown less threatening.
	2. Take a look with me for a moment at the Iceberg on the front of your bulletin.
		1. The world around us sees the tip of the iceberg, our behavior.
		2. What the world doesn’t see is the lifetime of discipline beneath the water.
			1. The hidden iceberg is the motives, ethics and beliefs that undergird our attitude and impact or create the seen behaviors.
		3. Put yourself in the place of the crewman in the Titanic’s crow’s nest.
			1. We are sailing the North Atlantic and we see the tip of the iceberg.
			2. If we have been drilled to expect the unexpected, we know how to respond better.
				1. Practicing mystery (or expecting the unexpected) makes icebergs less threatening.
1. Why does our worship matter?
	1. Imagine again with me that we are each characters caught up in Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol.*
		1. We are Ebenezer Scrooge and we have already been visited by the ghosts of Christmas past and present and are just now being visited by the ghost of Christmas future.
			1. In this future, we have never worshiped.
			2. What do you think the ghost would be showing us?
			3. Would our lives be rich with relationships, purposeful with ministries, and joyful with freedom to choose our responses?
			4. Or would we be shipwrecked, caught in the maelstrom of ever-increasing demands upon our seemingly scarce resources?
	2. I have the impression that humanity has fairytale morphed into fricasseed frogs.
		1. Perhaps you know the acronym (as Beth Collins devotedly does) of FROG = fully rely on God.
		2. Humanity is born as cute babies fully relying on God.
		3. So how do you fricassee a frog?
		4. If you pop it into a pot of boiling water, the frog is smart and hops right out.
		5. But, if you gradually turn up the heat on the waterlogged frog, it placidly sits, not realizing its own impending demise.
			1. Voila – fricasseed frog.
		6. We have been fricasseeing for some time now!
			1. Have you played this game lately?
				1. “I remember when…”
			2. Technology has exponentially exploded our options, pace, and expectations of reality.
	3. I call it the “Fast and Furious Syndrome.”
		1. *Fast & Furious* is an action film [franchise](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Media_franchise) starring Vin Diesel concerning illegal [street racing](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Street_racing) and [heists](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robbery).
		2. This [Universal Pictures](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Universal_Studios) series was established in 2001.
		3. While critics panned its simplistic might-makes-right plot line, the overwhelming box office response has led to a new blockbuster every two years.
		4. As of May 2015, it has become Universal's biggest franchise of all time.
	4. Please don’t mistake my labeling this “Fast and Furious Syndrome” as a tired old wheeze of wishing we could turn back time.
		1. *Besides, I wouldn’t be caught dead in Cher’s Bob Mackie costume singing “If I could turn back time…”*
	5. I **am** encouraging us to be observant of what is inevitably happening all around us.
		1. Life includes change.
			1. The rate of change continues to accelerate.
		2. Change brings about uncertainty, wilderness wandering, and discomfort with the unfamiliar.
			1. Living fast and furious, we find ourselves crowding out kindness and pushing away praise.
			2. We are losing our attitude of gratitude.
			3. We are forgetting an assumption of abundance.
			4. We are sensing scarcity and allowing our brains to be amygdala hijacked.
				1. Fight or flight – that’s all the time we seem to have these days.

The lamb has been slaughtered.

This was NOT expected!

Who can open the scroll and unlock our destiny?

* 1. Remember, Revelation is relevant right now!
		1. The answer is not hidden but revealed right here.
1. If Fast and Furious has crowded out kindness, let us resolve to PUSH back.
	1. Let us be proactive about adapting to constantly changing circumstances.
		1. Let us PUSH together.
		2. Let us Praise Until Something Happens.
			1. PUSH
	2. The lamb is worthy to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing.
		1. The Greek words here are fascinating.
		2. Power is dunamis from which we get dynamic.
		3. Wisdom is Sophia from which we get a woman’s name.
		4. Glory is doxos from which we get the doxology.
		5. Blessing is eulogia from which we get eulogy.
			1. Why do we wait until funerals to give eulogies?
			2. Why can’t we share blessings every day of our lives?
2. Perhaps we do not perceive the blessings around us.
	1. Remember the children’s song, “Count your blessings”?
	2. Counting our blessings is a discipline.
	3. For some, the word discipline conjures up torture:
		1. Slogging away at things we hate.
		2. Persevering through pain.
		3. Wallowing in the victim mentality of doing something only because somebody made us.
	4. Let me offer an alternative perception of discipline:
		1. Discipline is the art of remembering what we want.
			1. I bet this is not what you expected.
	5. So what do we want?
		1. We all want the powerful grace, mercy and unconditional love God offers everyone.
		2. How do we get it?
		3. John says we Presbyterian elders get it when we fall down and worship.
		4. John writes not to reveal the future but to give praise for the past and to uncover its relevance for all of us in every present moment.
			1. The great apocalyptic event is not in some future date to be predicted.
			2. The great apocalyptic event was the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.
				1. This is the God who was and is and is to come.
		5. Listen again to verses one and three of our hymn, *Blessing and Honor*
			1. Blessing and honor and glory and power; wisdom and riches and strength evermore be to the Lamb who our battle has won whose are the kingdom, the crown, and the throne.
			2. Ever ascending the song and the joy, ever descending the love from on high; blessings and honor and glory and praise; this is the theme of the hymns that we raise.
				1. My former Princeton Professor Brian Blount observes, “Songs serve to unbind a people from their fear.”
				2. When we remember that we want God’s unconditional love and praise God who is worthy, our discipline of worship over the course of our lives PUSHES out fear.

Instead of being fricasseed, we are filled with faith, hope and love.

1. I had the joy this week of celebrating Claire Brown’s 100th birthday with her and a banquet room of good friends and admirers.
	1. Incidentally, Claire was born in the same month and year as Beverly Cleary, the Newberry award-winning author of *Beezus and Ramona* as well as many other classic children’s novellas, which are worth revisiting no matter your age.
	2. As several of us paid tribute and prematurely eulogized Claire, we touched upon her wisdom, strength, and blessings she readily shares with all those around her.
		1. What people highlighted reminds me of the tip of the iceberg.
			1. We see Claire’s wisdom, strength and blessings.
			2. What we do not see is the tons of hard work – the discipline – these blessings required.
				1. May we each enjoy practicing the art of remembering what we want.

Why?

Because we can expect the unexpected.

Iceberg – dead ahead!

Revelation is artful.

1. Literally, Revelation is a letter to seven churches in Turkey along a major Roman road.
	1. The seven cities are addressed in their order along the road: Ephesus, then North to Smyrna and Pergamum, turning southeast to Thyatira and continue on to Sardia, Philadelphia, and Laodicea.
	2. Readers throughout the ages have taken four basic chronological approaches to interpreting revelation:
		1. A message of perseverance for the present persecutions in the first century.
		2. A history from John’s day until the second coming of Christ and beyond.
		3. A futurist look at events at the end of history.
		4. A symbolic representation of the continual struggle of good and evil applicable at any point in time.
2. Revelation is written in what is known as the apocalyptic style.
	1. Apocalypse means uncovering, unveiled or revealed.
	2. The apocalyptic style of ancient literature is written under the name of a hero – in this case, under the name of John the apostle, who was a hero to the early church.
	3. It is not meant to be a psychic’s attempts at predicting the future.
	4. Rather, revelation is artful.
3. Art arrests our attention and allows us to think about applying its lessons to our lives right here and now.
	1. Many have tried to interpret Revelation’s art as a future apocalyptic event.
	2. I want to encourage us to listen to Revelation as a revealing of THE apocalyptic event of two thousand years ago: the life, death and resurrection of our Lord.
	3. With that artful apocalyptic event arresting our attention listen for God’s hopeful instruction to each of us: