

What do you do on Sunday afternoons? I'll tell you what I do! If I'm not napping, or mowing the yard, or napping, or helping Sarah with her flower garden, or napping, or repainting on the boy's bedrooms, or napping, sometimes I watch golf on television on Sunday afternoons. My two brothers think I'm crazy; they say there is nothing more boring in the whole world than golf on television. But for those of us who try to keep the little ball on the short grass, there is nothing more exciting than watching those guys hit it three hundred yards, and battle it out down the fairways and on the greens shot after shot.

If you ever stumble across a televised golf tournament you will notice that spectators are polite and applaud all the golfers; even after a man has a double-bogey they applaud his effort. But occasionally in recent years someone has started cheering after their favorite player has hit a mammoth drive down the middle of the fairway, "You da man!" I don't know who started it, or where he lives, but every now and then you'll hear someone explode in affirmation after a great shot, "You da man!"

"You da man!" That's what I felt like on Sunday afternoon two weeks ago when Phil Mickelson sank that birdie putt on the 18th green at Augusta to shoot thirty-one on the back nine and win the green jacket at the Masters. Those fairways are so narrow, and those greens are so slick, and the whole world was watching, and he made five birdies on the last seven holes! And when he made that last putt I almost jumped to my feet and shouted, "You da man!"

Here is the word for the day! It's not a set of commandments to be followed, nor a parable to be pondered, nor a Pauline epistle to analyzed and explained, it is an affirmation of admiration, it's a "You da man!" sung by all the angels of heaven!

"Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered
to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might
and honor and glory and blessing!"

In case you have forgotten, or have not noticed, let me remind you that this book at the end of the New Testament is one of the most mysterious and misunderstood pieces of literature found in the entire Bible. Couched in symbols with visions, and strange creatures and many headed beasts, with a gates of pearl, streets of gold, a sea of glass and thrones and angels, and a four riders on horseback directing a cataclysmic battle at the end of time, the book of Revelation appears to be a weird and wacky book.

It is a book which had a hard very battle winning its way into the collection of Christian scriptures; eminent scholars of the Bible like Martin Luther rejected it completely;

to this very day it is not to be read in public in many orthodox churches in the eastern world.

But it is a book which brought a powerful message to those who first heard and understood its words. It was addressed to people living under the thumb of Rome, in a time when the Roman emperor declared that all subjects must bow down and declare that "Caesar is Lord!" under the threat of being sent to the prisons, or the crosses, or the arenas with the wild beasts.

To people who refused to bow down to Caesar, but who steadfastly declared that "Christ is Lord!"; who suffered persecution and death for their faith, this strange book of the Bible was written. It was a trumpet call of encouragement and hope for them to stand firm in the face of persecution, danger and death. It was like the sound of an aria in the Shawshank prison.

Remember "The Shawshank Redemption"? Andy Dufresne is sentenced to two back-to-back life terms for crimes he did not commit. That tough world of Shawshank Prison conspires to destroy humanity. Andy writes every week to the state legislature requesting books for the prison library. From out of nowhere, a huge shipment of used books and records, accompanied by a check, gets dumped in the warden's office. Andy puts one of the records on the prison record player. Intoxicated by the beauty of an aria, Andy locks out the warden and plays a portion of "The Marriage of Figaro" over the prison loudspeaker. Everyone in Shawshank Prison stands transfixed by the music. Everyone is astounded by this moment of intrusive beauty in a horrible place. Torture follows, but Andy explains to his inmate friends how he endured.

"I had Mr. Mozart to keep me company. It is in here (pointing to his head and heart). That's the beauty of music . . . so you don't forget that there are places in the world not made out of stone, that there's something inside that they can't get to, that they can't touch. It is yours."

That's what the Revelation to John is all about! It is a defiant song sung in a world gone mad, set upon the destruction of everything that we believe is good and right and true and beautiful!

According to John, the scene is heaven, and the business of the day is the opening of a scroll sealed with seven seals, which will unlock the secrets of what is about to take place in heaven and on earth. A mighty angel asks with a loud voice, "Who is worthy to open the scroll and break the seals?" John looks around and finds there is no one who is worthy and able, and he begins to weep bitterly. But suddenly one of the elders, seated on one of the thrones says, "Do not weep. The Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals." He can read heaven's book and reveal what God has in store for heaven and earth. Then John sees him, he appears as a Lamb which had been slaughtered. And all heaven begins to sing, "You are worthy to take

the scroll and to open its seals.”

“Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered
to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might
and honor and glory and blessing!”

Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered, he is the one who is able to open heaven’s book. He is the one who can show us what God has in store for us! He is the one who can tell us how God wants us to live! He is the one who have the secrets of life in his hands. Worthy is the Lamb who was slaughtered.

Notice whom the angels do not say is worthy to open heaven’s book and receive the seven-fold blessing!

The angels do not say that our favorite politician is worthy to open heaven’s book and receive the seven-fold blessing of God. That is news to some of us! We live in a difficult world with many problems, and we all know what is wrong with the world. And we think that we what it will take to make things right! Just give me ten minutes and I can tell you! We all have our favorite politicians and candidates for public office, and we think if they are just elected everything will be made right. And that is all well and good, that is what makes our democratic government work.

It all well and good, except when we get carried away. Except when we get carried away, and we start telling people that they have to agree with everything that we believe, that have to accept everything that our particular party stands for. Political parties and economic systems are human institutions and have their place, but they are human institutions, always full of flaws and easily corruptible, and in continual need of reform.

The angels do not say that our favorite politicians or candidates are able to open heaven’s book of secret’s and worthy to receive heaven’s seven-fold blessing.

And the angels do not say that Alan Greenspan is able to open heaven’s book and worthy to receive heaven’s seven-fold blessing! But, of course, some of us can never be convinced. Some of us believe the color of heaven is green, and the streets of heaven are paved with greenback dollars. Nothing is more precious to us than our pocketbooks.

It’s at the heart of every election. Sure-fire formulas for political success must always include this simple strategy, “It’s the pocketbook, stupid!” Political strategists say that a successful campaign must devise some kind of economic incentive which can put a chicken in every pot, a new car in every garage, a few more bucks in the saving account.

But when all is said and done, the answer to life’s problems and question cannot be bought in any store, or won with any salary increase. Jesus said our lives do not consist in

the abundance of our possessions. Alan Greenspan is not the one who is able to open heaven's book of life and receive heaven's seven-fold blessing.

And notice that the angels do not say that Michael Douglas, or Jennifer Lopez, or Arnold Palmer are able to open heaven's book of life and receive heaven's seven-fold blessing. But we would never know it by American society. How many dollars we spend on entertainment, movies, the latest fashions, country club memberships, softball balls and bates, cheer-leading outfits. We think it will make us happy! And we chase it all over the world!

A couple of years ago I met a man and woman from London, England at a minor league baseball game in Memphis, Tennessee. They had come to America to see Graceland, and to commemorate the 25th anniversary of Elvis Presley's death. And the next morning the lobby of the motel where we were staying was crowded with a bus load of people from New Zealand, who also had come halfway around the world for that very purpose. They had come clear across the Pacific Ocean and halfway across America just to see the King's castle, just to see the place where they laid the King, just to lay their own flowers on the King's grave! Can you imagine such a thing!

Can you imagine such a thing? Don't answer that! And I won't have to tell you how much money I spent flying twice across the Atlantic Ocean to put my feet on holy ground at St. Andrew's, Scotland, where they started playing golf in the 15th century, where Old Tom Morris started making golf clubs and won the first five British Open golf championships. That is real heavenly soil!

But according to the angels Old Tom Morris, and Arnold Palmer and Phil Mickelson, nor Alan Greenspan, or our favorite politicians are not able to open heaven's book of life. The only one worthy to assume that roll and to receive that blessing is the Lamb that was slaughtered! The man who died on the cross!

The man who died on the cross is the only one able to open heaven's book of life. The man who gave his life for his friends is the only worthy to receive the seven-fold blessing of heaven.

This simple man, afire with the flame of God, filled with compassion for the crowds, resolute in his refusal to swerve from following his mission, even in the face of death, this is the man! This simple man, the fearless friend of the poor and rich, the Jew and the Gentile, the sick and the well, the well-thought-of and the outcast, the young and the old, this man is the one who is able to show us how to live! W.H. Auden put it this way;

He is the Way.
Follow him through the land of unlikeness;
You will see rare beasts,

And have unique adventures.

He is the Truth.
Seek him in the kingdom of anxiety;
You will come to a great city
That has expected your return for years.

He is the Life.
Love him in the world of the flesh;
And at your marriage all its seasons
Shall dance for joy.¹

In one of his books, Peter J. Gomes, professor of Christian morals at Harvard University Divinity School, tells the story of meeting the Queen Mother of England at the Royal Lodge in Windsor Great Park one Sunday morning after being in church with her. He said,

“We had six minutes of conversation; I timed it. We had been in church and we spoke of the sermon as people do after church, as doubtless you will today. Her Majesty said to me, ‘Wasn’t the sermon wonderful?’ Well, actually, it wasn’t. As a matter of fact it was quite terrible, but I did what anyone would do under those circumstances; I lied. I said, ‘Indeed it was, Ma’am,’ and then she said, with eyes glistening and fixed right on me, ‘I do like a bit of good news on Sunday, don’t you?’”²

We all like a bit of good news on Sunday! And that is why we are here today! And here is the good news from that strange book tacked on at the end of the Bible.

There is one who has the power to open heaven’s book, who has the wisdom to know what’s right, and the strength and might to set things right, right with the world, and right with us. There is one in our midst who is worthy of our very best. I say he is “the man.” What do you say?

1. W. H. Auden, *For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio*
2. Peter J. Gomes, p. 264, “Starting Over,” *Strength for the Journey*, Harper San Francisco, 2003.