“This Makes No Sense” - Stephanie Sorge, 8/10/25

I’d like to think that John’s intended audience had an easier time interpreting his letters than we do. I keep reading, and re-reading, and coming back to the same thought: this makes no sense!

The scene has already been set - a throne room, with four winged creatures with eyes in the front and back, 24 thrones occupied by 24 elders, each with a golden crown. All of this surrounds a larger throne, with one seated on the throne who looks like jasper and carnelian. Is that supposed to be like a living statue, a person made of red stone? There’s a rainbow that looks like an emerald, a sea of crystal that looks like glass, and thunder and lightning are coming from the throne. None of that makes sense!

Then there is a scroll, and apparently no one is able to open it. John weeps until he hears the voice of one of the elders. Don’t worry - the Lion of the Tribe of Judah is here, and he can open the scroll. The animal that actually emerges isn’t a lion, but a lamb - two very different creatures! The lamb is standing, as if it had been slaughtered. Does a slaughtered lamb stand? And it’s not just any standing, slaughtered lamb - this lamb has seven eyes and seven horns! Lambs don’t have any horns, let alone 7! None of this makes sense!

Throughout Revelation, Jesus is represented as the self-sacrificial lamb, drawing on imagery from Exodus and the prophets. This is the one who was brutally slaughtered, but who still lives! The people may have been looking for a lion of a leader to come from the tribe of Judah, but what they got, instead, was a lamb.

Was Jesus the one for whom the people had waited? One of the most poignant conversations in Scripture happens on the road to Emmaus, following Jesus’s death. Jesus was walking alongside two of his followers, who didn’t recognize him, and one confessed, “We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.” The distance between expectation and reality can be a gaping chasm of despair. The higher the hope, the harder the fall.

In Revelation, it is clear: this bloodied and slain, symbolically meek and mild animal, is equal to God, worthy of worship. Jesus may not have brought the political revolution and military deliverance some had expected, but the salvation he procured is complete. What looked like weakness was power. Even on the cross, his crucified body was a symbol of strength. The lamb in Revelation is very much alive, all-seeing and all-powerful, but the signs of bloody sacrifice and death are still very present. Christ’s power and glory, according to John, are inseparable from his self-sacrificial death.

The whole concept of blood sacrifice is so distant from our worldview. It doesn’t make sense, at least, not to me. And yet, the image persists in what is often a dominant theory of atonement for many Christians. The basic idea of substitutionary atonement theory is that the cost of sin is death, and it must be paid. By dying on the cross, Jesus, who was without sin, took on the guilt of the sins of the world. His blood was substituted for the blood of sinners, satisfying the need for punishment and freeing the rest of us from the weight of sin we could otherwise never escape. Blood was required, blood was paid, and because of the sacrificial love of Jesus, we have been spared the consequences we deserve.

Substitutionary atonement theory is why we have so many bloody songs, both in older hymns and in a lot of Christian contemporary music, too. “There is wonder-working power in the blood of the lamb…” “Are you washed in the soul-cleansing blood of the lamb?” “There’s a fountain of blood that atones for the soul…” In our hymnal, Twila Paris’s song extols the lamb of God: “Oh wash me in his precious blood,” and another hymn affirms, “My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus’ blood and righteousness.” The concept of blood sacrifice might not be so ancient, after all.

Even so, it doesn’t make sense to me. It is a Scripturally-based, theologically-orthodox soteriology - a doctrine of salvation - but try as I might, I struggle to see the good news in it. Do we worship a blood-thirsty God? Or a God who lacks the power or grace to forgive sin unless someone has died for it? Those characteristics have been attributed to divine beings in many different religions and worldviews, but I can’t reconcile them with God as I understand God to be. Still, the language here is pretty clear: “by your blood you purchased for God persons from every tribe, language, people, and nation.” While I appreciate the inclusivity of that line, I still reject the idea that God trades with blood as currency.

Another concern I have with such vivid imagery of violence and sacrifice is that it has been twisted to glorify suffering, even to make it holy and admirable, as the most pure way to follow the suffering Christ. There’s a view that those who suffer are closer to God in their suffering. If that’s true, it’s because God draws closest in compassion, care, and solidarity to the suffering. Suffering doesn’t make us more holy. Suffering that can be alleviated - including hunger, poverty, and lack of access to basic necessities - should be alleviated.

While many forms of suffering are related to human activity, suffering that comes as a direct result of violence or oppression has also been glorified, when it is anything but holy. Violence is not holy. Abuse is not holy. State-sanctioned murder and deadly systems of oppression are not holy. Jesus’s crucifixion was violent, abusive, state-sanctioned murder, and inevitable in his confrontation of the deadly systems of oppression and empire in his time. It exposed the brutality of those powers and rebuked them, showing that they would not have the final word.

So what makes this lamb worthy of power, wealth, wisdom, might, honor, glory, and blessing? What might move every creature on heaven and earth, and under the earth, and in the sea, to offer their praise? What would move us from weeping to rejoicing? How about victory over the powers of evil and death? Waking up in a world in which each person’s value and dignity are affirmed, where everyone has what they need, and no one is exploited for the gain of a few - that would be cause for celebration and praise!

So much of the pain and suffering in this world makes no sense. Why spend hundreds of millions of dollars of Federal Emergency Management funds to build detention centers for immigrants, when so many people are struggling to rebuild their lives and communities from increasingly devastating natural disasters? Why spend money to burn food already paid for and overseas, rather than allowing it to be distributed to feed hungry children? Why gut our National Parks, which actually bring in revenue? Why make guns even easier to buy and harder to register and regulate, when so many innocent lives are lost, or forever changed?

It makes no sense. Kind of like how a slaughtered lamb standing up, in all of its 7-eyed 7-horned glory, makes no sense. Kind of like how a lamb that is also a lion makes no sense. Kind of like how a crucified savior makes no sense. Kind of like how God’s power is made manifest in people and places that look utterly powerless. Kind of like how the meek will inherit the earth, or how mourning will turn into dancing, or how we can affirm a victory already assured but not yet realized. None of this makes any sense.

It can be so hard to hold onto hope when each day brings down more hammers of defeat and despair. I was speaking with someone who studied the Holocaust extensively, and she was astonished at how we are recreating Dachau at “Alligator Alcatraz." Horrible atrocities are being done in our name, within our borders, using our resources. We don’t want to stand by, to just let all of this happen, and yet, what can we do? It is hard to imagine what actions can make a difference in the face of such cruelty and injustice. It goes beyond our senses.

When nothing we can imagine seems like it will be enough to save us, maybe we can embrace a savior and hope that move beyond the confines of our senses. A savior not made more palatable for our sake, but one who confuses and confounds. In many ways, we are beyond sense-making capacity for all that is going on in our world. Our hope has to go beyond what makes sense.

Paul put it pretty succinctly in his first letter to the Corinthians: “God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.” Some days, faithfulness may look more like foolishness. When we feel powerless to do anything, we can remember that even the most formidable human powers cannot overcome the power of God, and that sometimes, God’s power looks a lot like weakness, if we didn’t know any better. It’s the slaughtered lamb, standing before God. It’s the crucified savior, who defied the last word of death. It’s resistance to the powers of Empire, greed, and hate - which may look pretty futile. I can’t make it make sense. But together, we can keep the faith.