

‘Is He Worthy?’ by Andrew Peterson : the story behind the song

Extract from ‘Is He Worthy: the story behind the song’ by Brentwood Benson
(<http://blog.brentwoodbenson.com/is-he-worthy-story-behind-the-song/>)

“When we were in the studio working on volume one in the fall of 2017, I remembered a voice memo on my phone that I hope you never hear. Songwriting is a vulnerable process, full of false starts, bad ideas, mumbled phrases, wrong notes, and downright embarrassing exercises in futility, but sometimes those bad ideas turn into good ones in disguise. The voice memo I’m talking about was recorded while I was driving somewhere in Nashville, I think. In it, I hum a melody, then I sing, “We do.” Then I hum another melody, and I answer it again with, “We do.” I had no clear idea how to sing it, or what the question was, but I realize now that I had been thinking about a Kenyan liturgy we use in church. It goes like this:

Celebrant: Is the Father with us?

People: He is.

Celebrant: Is Christ among us?

People He is.

Celebrant: Is the Spirit here?

People: He is.

Celebrant: This is our God!

People: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Celebrant: We are his people;

People: We are redeemed.

I wrote the verses of the song in a similar question-and-answer format, because when that happens in a liturgical service, I’m profoundly edified. I need to join my voice to a group of people reminding each other what is true, not just listening to a sermon but partaking in one. And then I got to the chorus and asked myself, what does this have to do with the resurrection? And I remembered another question-and-answer moment in Revelation, one that thunders with the love of God.

The resurrection of Jesus, you see, is central to the Gospel. In every sermon in Acts, Peter and Paul talk about the resurrection of Jesus. Here in America we’re pretty good at Good Friday. We’re willing to dive deep during Holy Week and confront the holy terror of the crucifixion. We’re even willing to get up early on Easter Sunday for the sunrise service. But then, after an egg hunt, we’re ready to move on to Mother’s Day. But N. T. Wright challenges us in *Surprised by Hope* to emulate Peter and Paul, to make such a fuss over Jesus’s resurrection that the world can’t help but notice. What, the world may ask, is the big deal? And the church can reply, joyfully, that this is what the crucifixion was always leading to: the end of death; the new creation; these wonderful but broken bodies of ours, resurrected and glorified and made immortal, the way they were always meant to be.

Is He Worthy? is my attempt at making a fuss over Jesus’s victory over death. And in Revelation 5 we get one of the most staggering images of who this Jesus really is and what He’s done for us and for all of His creation. The prophet, John, is weeping loudly because no one can be found who is worthy to break the seal and open the scroll. And then, quietly it seems, Jesus appears. A Lion and a Lamb, ascending the throne, revealing his glory to the angels and archangels and elders and, most astonishing of all, to you and me. All of heaven bursts into song:

*“Worthy are you to take the scroll
and to open its seals,
for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God
from every tribe and language and people and nation,
and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God,
and they shall reign on the earth.”
Revelation 5:9-10 (ESV)*

And *that's* the solution to the real riddle, the one that troubled me for most of my life. You see, I had been taught that Jesus loved me so much that He died to save me from my sin. But I didn't know *why*. What was His end game? What was the purpose? Why go to all that trouble? Just so I could go float around with Porky Pig on a cloud? It made me feel guilty, but it didn't wake up any longing to be with Him. But all the breadcrumbs of the Old Testament, the birth, life, and death of Jesus, even His resurrection, are leading to something so good and glorious and yet so astonishingly simple: a new earth. A new creation. He is remaking what the Fall destroyed. He's ransoming a people for Himself from every tribe, nation, and tongue, making a kingdom — *and we shall reign on the earth*. That, my friends, is a staggering promise. It's good, good news. Yes, the Incarnation and Crucifixion are important—but we mustn't stop short of the climax of the story. You and I won't be floating on cartoon clouds. We'll be tending a new garden as ransomed, redeemed, resurrected, fully human beings, living to glorify Jesus himself, who alone deserves all blessing and honor and glory. That makes me want to sing.”

About the Author: For more than twenty years now, Andrew Peterson has been about the business of quietly changing lives in four-minute increments. Over the years, Peterson has forged his own path as artist, songwriter, and author to create art that aches with sorrow, joy and integrity — and that are, at the end of the day, part of a real and ongoing human conversation.