

A throne without a king (Revelation 5:11-14; John 21:1-19)

In Revelation, Jesus is the Weird Barbie of lambs.

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I was reluctant to see the *Barbie* movie. But when my stepdaughter wanted to take me for my birthday a couple of years ago—assuring me that I would “loooooove it”—I went. I do think she loved it more than I did; feminist biblical scholars are always going to be more skeptical than feminist 10-year-olds. But I did fall in love with one character: Weird Barbie, portrayed by Kate McKinnon. I know I am not alone here; at least two of my pastor-type friends feel the same way. Of course, I hated that Weird Barbie is ostracized and exiled just for not conforming to the Barbie standard. Or is she ostracized for being loved differently in the real world?

One of the movie's conceits is that the real world and the Barbie world are clearly, definitively demarcated from each other, even as they are connected through the characters in the Barbie world. In some ways, this week's readings from John and Revelation operate the same way. The gospel reading takes us to a little real-world conversation between Peter and Jesus. Jesus asks Peter whether he loves Jesus, and Peter assures Jesus of his devotion. Often we see this scene as one in which Jesus anoints Peter to be the head of the church.

If I'm honest about how I understand the scene, I have to admit that the scars of Jesus' death and even the foreshadowing of Peter's martyrdom are far from my mind. Rather I imagine Jesus more in the vein of Barbie in her world. He is

empowered and smart. He is beautiful and charismatic. He is compassionate and kind. He is loved and adored. Jesus, in our popular imagination, is the ideal god-king—enthroned, all-powerful, with jewels and attendants and all the creatures of heaven and earth worshipping him after his death is redeemed in the resurrection.

In fact, this is the scene that Revelation invites us into. Every creature on earth and in heaven sings in worship to the One at the center of the throne and to the Lamb, who we understand as Jesus. And into this image of worship, we so often insert our Barbie-Lamb picture of Jesus.

The lectionary, however, leaves out a crucial detail of Revelation's description of this heavenly reverie. Just a few verses earlier, Revelation describes the Lamb in a very odd way: "between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered, having seven horns and seven eyes..." (5:6). It's not the ideal Jesus who stands at the center of God's world; it is the Lamb who was slain. Standing askew, marks of his slaughter still visible, more horns and eyes than any critter should have—this is the strangest lamb ever imagined! It is the Weird Barbie of lambs who were slain.

Revelation unveils for us a foundational contradiction of our faith. Once we get to the center of God's world, to the center of the throne, there is no king there. There is a lamb, standing as if slaughtered. While we see many of the trappings of royalty and adoration, that adoration is not directed at the strong man who has put everything into submission or sits enthroned receiving his subjects. Perfection and prosperity are not God's fundamental qualities.

This Weird Lamb might be overlooked and discarded in our world that wields violence as proof of power and celebrates conformity as proof of loyalty. Even Barbie recognizes that Weird Barbie was understood differently in the "real" world—and that Barbie needs to embrace Weird Barbie if either world is to be repaired. God's world centers repair in the face of violence, vulnerability in the place of power, creativity in the place of conformity, love in the place of loyalty, Weird Lamb in the place of King Jesus.