

Worship the One Worthy of Glory and Honor

A reflection from Revelation

Revelation 4:6b- 5:2, 11-14
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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Martin Luther, who is credited with starting the Protestant Reformation 499 years ago, considered the Book of Revelation to be offensive and neither prophetic nor apostolic. In fact, he made an attempt to have it removed from the Bible. Our own John Calvin, though he accepted Revelation, admitted that he wasn't sure what to do with the book. It was the only book in the New Testament for which he didn't write a commentary.

Well, after hearing this passage from Revelation 4 and 5, your immediate reaction is probably similar to mine. What is that supposed to mean, and how in the world is it relevant to you and me, and to the church? Granted, this book takes a lot of work in trying to determine its relevance to us in the here and now. That's probably why you've never heard me preach from this book before. So why now?

Several months ago I was asked by an old seminary friend to be the worship leader at a 4-day conference at Zephyr Point Presbyterian Conference Center in Nevada. More specifically, located right on the southeastern shore of Lake Tahoe. (It's a tough gig, but somebody had to do it ☺) I fly out this Wednesday morning and return late the following Monday. The conference is called Summer Sing 2016, and it has been held annually now for 27 years. A couple hundred church choir singers will gather to learn a variety of music from guest conductors and hymn writers. I'll be leading a different style service of worship on each of the four days. I think my favorite will be a meditative Morning Praise service in the amphitheater literally on the shoreline overlooking the lake.

Zephyr Point truly fits the Celtic understanding of a 'thin place,' where there is very little to no distance between the spiritual and the material, a place of such natural beauty that experiencing a connection with the Sacred Presence of God is almost a given.

Some of my enthusiasm was tempered, however, when I was told the theme for this year's conference: **Glory and Honor**. It's based on the scripture verse **Revelation 4:11**, "**You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created.**" So that's what I'll be attempting to tackle at this conference, and in part with you this morning.

Glory and honor, while a great theme for church music, is a bit harder to address from a progressive theological perspective. I'll get into that in just a moment.

First, I want to boldly declare the **Book of Revelation** is *not* a literal description of the historical events that must take place in some kind of an apocalyptic cycle as we

near the end of time as we know it. Instead, modern biblical scholars believe this book was written as **a means of encouragement to help build the faith of the early Christians churches that were suffering under the persecution of the Roman Empire toward the end of the first century.** Intricately connected to a proper understanding of Revelation is the **ancient mandate that required the worship of the emperor.** This book stands in brave opposition to that mandate, revealing that it is only God and Christ who are worthy to receive our worship.

It seems that Revelation was also a means of correction and warning to those early churches to remain faithful in their worship and service to God. Earlier in this book the author indicts some of those congregations with **departing from what should be their first love – Jesus; for lacking in service – revealing they are more dead than alive; and for becoming complacent in their faith – being neither cold nor hot, but lukewarm.** These are very serious indictments: loss of focus on Jesus, lack of service, and complacency in faith. It behooves any congregation, therefore, to evaluate if it has moved into any of these categories, and if so, to do something about it. This aspect alone demonstrates how Revelation is more relevant to us today than we first thought.

In looking at this morning's passage, it's still a hard task to sift through and try to understand all the images and symbolism in order to uncover its message. But we can't deny that it's an impressive list of images: the one seated on the throne, the four living creatures each with six wings and covered with eyes, the twenty-four elders, the scroll with seven seals, myriads and myriads and thousands and thousands of angels, a Lamb looking as if it had been slaughtered, and finally every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea all joining their voices in song to worship God. Perhaps, and hopefully, the original audience of this letter had a clearer understanding of what these bizarre images were trying to represent.

Assume for a moment, however, that we should **hear this passage as a community of faith that needs to evaluate whether or not we have turned from our first love, have become negligent in our service, or have become lukewarm in our faith. In a nutshell, this strange biblical scene simply focuses on worshiping the Ones worthy to receive praise, glory and honor.** It does so through a series of songs, each one building and adding singers in ever-expanding inclusiveness.

The first song starts small, with just the four living creatures (let's say they're a soprano, alto, tenor, and bass) singing "Holy, holy, holy, the Lord God the Almighty." (Now that would make a great text for a hymn!) The next song adds the twenty-four elders, singing to the One on the throne, "You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power." Next, when the Lamb (a reference to Jesus Christ) is found to be worthy to open the scroll, the living creatures and elders sing a new song in praise of the Lamb. On the fourth song there is the addition of an indecipherably large number of angels, singing in full voice. Then the final song builds to the point of expanding the singers to include every living creature in all of creation. It doesn't get any more inclusive than that. All sing to a huge crescendo, "To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!" Worship closes with the four living creatures saying, "Amen!" And the elders fell down and worshiped.

Well now it's time for the hard part. **What does any of this have to do with us? Most simply, it should lead us to evaluate our own worship. Notice that it's not about the specific style of worship that is being addressed, but whether our worship is born out of**

a response to God – who created all things - reflecting our joy and praise and thanksgiving.

The original audience, remember, was being instructed that no one but God, and in particular not the Roman emperor, was to receive their worship. For us today, especially in this election season, that means we must not worship our leaders, or our country. In our congregation it also means not falling into the trap of worshiping our beautiful sanctuary, or the stained glass, or the incredible pipe organ, or the music program, or that person who stands behind the pulpit, or previous accomplishments and deeds of service and mission. All these things can be helpful in aiding us to worship, but **they must not become distractions to our primary purpose, which is to glorify God in, through, and by our worship.**

To put it another way, in the book of Revelation **worship is not a Holy Show performed by the clergy, organist and choir in front of an audience.** Theologian Soren Kierkegaard, in comparing a service of worship to a stage production, reminds us that **the congregation is not the audience. God is the audience.** You, as the people in the congregation, are the **participants**, and the clergy and the choir and organist are there not to perform but to enable the congregation to participate in reverently worshipping God in glory and honor.

So I ask you to reflect upon the following: **Why do you worship?** Not why do you come to church, not *how* do you worship, but *why*? What is the purpose for and reason why you worship? Also, **do you believe God ‘needs’ or ‘demands’ our worship?** We've already established the Bible calls us to worship no one except God, but that's not the same thing as God demanding our worship.

Speaking personally, I don't believe in a needy God. Nor do I don't believe in a narcissistic God that demands our praise and affirmation in some sort of ego trip. Worship, therefore, isn't for God's benefit but for ours. WE are the ones who need to worship.

A life of faith is about living a transformed life, and worship can contribute to that process of transformation. **Worship can change us.** And yes, different styles of worship can enhance and encourage that for different people. **So it's not so much about how we worship, but rather that we worship.** I would answer the question of why we worship, in part, this way:

- acknowledge and connect with God – the Creator of all that is
- learn about the ways of God and the teachings of Jesus
- be emotionally and spiritually enriched
- gain strength for living life

The word "worship" itself means to honor and give respect and reverence. In both the Hebrew and Greek languages, worship refers to the act of humbly bowing down to the ground before someone greater, more powerful than oneself. And only God is worthy of our worship.

So for those of us who identify as Christians, let us claim and sing out as we worship, "You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created."

Honor and Glory, indeed!

Amen.