

Called to Worship

sermon digest

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Revelation 5:9-14

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We tend to get lost in the smoke and mirrors of the last book in the Bible, Revelation. The Greek word for the book, *Apocalypse*, has worked its way into the English language. Translated correctly "Revelation," it has come to mean the most horrible thing you can imagine about the termination of the planet. Apocalypse has become a code word for nuclear holocaust. We find it in the title of war movies or in the headlines of a news report on tsunamis and earthquakes. But somehow we get a distorted message: it is not real. Apocalypse is intended to raise the hair on the back of your neck or goose bumps on your arms—a surge of adrenaline. But after the show we can leave it all behind. Once we have adjusted our eyes to the bright sunlight of the perpetual spring outside the biblical theater, it all goes away. And we have missed the point again.

Something here is theatrical, but Apocalypse is not written to entertain. The writer named John has been exiled to the island of Patmos off the shore of modern Turkey. Instead of prosaic sermons in the style of Paul's letters, John has visions, some might call them nightmares, which he reports as messages from God to a people suffering under the iron fist of the Roman Empire. He sees a seven-headed beast rising from the sea, a new Babylon, mother of whores. He also sees a new Jerusalem, the city of light, coming down from heaven.

The visions appeal to the power of imagination in a style of writing that had become familiar to the Jews, Apocalypse. Apocalypse was the response of people disillusioned by the events of history. The Jews had expected God to protect them. They had a Covenant with the Almighty, a contract of protection. But the People of God had become a feather in the wind of history blown about by whatever empire happened to storm the smaller, weaker provinces around the Mediterranean. Questions hang in the air: Where is the God of Covenant? Where is God in our time of greatest need? What has happened to the people of promise? Does God care? Is God also the victim of the evil of this world? Is the God of creation no more capable of resisting the horrors of life than the Christians being nailed to crosses by Nero in the City of Rome and set afire to provide light for the gawking spectators?

What about Jesus? His very name means "savior." The Messiah to whom Christians looked for salvation, the lion turned out to be a lamb led to slaughter ironically during the season of Passover. The Roman killing machine had taken the last hope of God's people and lifted him up on their instrument of execution for all the world to witness. It was a statement of authority. Rome is god. Rome alone has the power to give or take life. Rome can make or break you. Bow and worship the Emperor. Again there is irony; Rome provided the central symbol of the Christian faith—a cross. So, what is left? Where do we turn from here? Apocalypse is the child of disillusionment, complete despair. The Christians of John's world were facing up to the obvious—hope was gone, nailed to a cross.

But that is the context of Apocalyptic, the setting from which it emerges, not the message of faith for which it is given. ***Apocalypse, Revelation is a call to worship.*** It is a ray of light in the black darkness of a world without compassion or concern for the little people who have become victims of the machine. It is an appeal to the deepest need in everyone of us, regardless of the circumstances of life, for every tribe and language and people and nation to join the chorus sung by every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them singing, "Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing."

Every Sunday morning we come here with the intention of worshipping God. We greet one another with love and respect. Some of us prepare through reflection on the events around us and meditation on the God beyond us. The sounds of worship are the songs of faith, which we hear in the notes of the instruments and recite in our souls as we are reminded of who we are and why we are here. We nearly always begin our service with a Call to Worship, a Psalm or litany that calls us into awareness of the God of grace at the center of our lives. We are a lot like John, projecting visions of God against the screen of our life experiences. We get into drama and theater to draw people in and to set the stage. We open the doors of memory flowing through the senses reminding us with John of the God

we worship: “‘I am the Alpha and the Omega.’ says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty (1:8).” We sing the hymns of faith that provide words for our prayers and our proclamation of praise. We taste the bread and cup. We view the symbols of worship in the art of the windows and banners. We embrace friends, and have the sense of being embraced by the love of God. We know whether we experience God here and whether we have responded to the call to worship.

But let’s be truthful about theatrics. Sometimes the scheduled “Call” does not work. We don’t hear. We are distracted by worries, fears, loss, or yesterday’s ball game. Worship may happen but it did not happen this time to me. We live in an age of entertainment in which we expect to be amused with everything we do. Folks come to church for all kinds of reasons. It may be pure habit. It’s Sunday, and that is what we do on Sunday. Most people are searching for something missing in their lives. They want to feel better about themselves, their families and friends, and the world around them.

So worship becomes an isle of fantasy on a sea of amusement. If the show is not more exciting than yesterday’s game or more beautiful than the HD screen on our big TV set or more sobering than yesterday’s news broadcast, the producers of worship have failed. It’s like going to a movie that has been lauded as the movie of the year and finding that it was over billed. The producer, the director, the actors, the technical effects have all missed the mark. This was no Oscar.

That is the message we hear a lot about worship, when the directors fail to produce God for us. Soren Kierkegaard painted a different picture of worship theater. He pointed to God as the audience as we join with the leaders in acts of worship. Instead of a critical view of the choir, the hymns and the sermon, we go home wondering if God was pleased with our offering of praise and thanksgiving that we presented today.

Robert Webber put it in a word: *Worship Is a Verb*. Worship is something we do, not something done to us or done for us. We hit the bottom in the mid 1990’s as the church growth movement, the electronic church of TV, and the mega-church phenomenon all collided with long-held church traditions and we entered the phase in modern church history that was labeled “Worship Wars.” It was a battle of styles and a war of productions that was frankly a bit sickening. People who had watched too many TV talk shows felt like they needed to be entertained on Sunday morning. In the competition between churches, the primary concern became meeting personal needs and making people feel good. Praise for God became a mixed bag of applause for the performers punctuated with bows and accolades.

The prayer we offer together to God every Sunday morning was traditionally given to the disciples and prayed by the church through the ages. The prayer calls us to worship with a reminder that we address “Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.” Not the pastor, the preacher, or any other performer on the stage, God is at the center of our worship. Our awareness of God calls us to reverence, praise, and commitment like nothing we can produce or stage on the theater of our services.

Crisis calls us to worship. A lot of experiences in life call us to worship. The joy of accomplishment of a major goal in life, like graduation or marriage, can be the key to spontaneous praise to the God who has created and loved us. To stand at the edge of the Grand Canyon and drink in the beauty of God’s creation leads to the kind of wonder and awe that makes us reach beyond our little world and limited selves. I shall never forget the sense of eternity, awareness of our Creator and fulfillment of my purpose in life when I first held my daughter and my son. Birth calls us to worship. Parents and grandparents catch a glimpse of the Hebrew intimation of immortality when we take the next generation into our arms.

Great music calls me to worship. I cannot read the liturgy of Revelation four and five without recalling the strands of Handel’s *Messiah*: “Worthy is the Lamb that was slain.” I am not alone here. The classics in music became classics because something has happened to the people who have experienced Mozart’s *Requiem*. Some music sticks in our heads and revives every time we touch the same or similar moment in life.

Apocalypse may be our clearest call to worship. In the darkest moments of life when it seems that all is lost, when we are stripped down to the essentials, we become aware that in the hierarchy of life’s

values, some things are just not all that important. The crises of life are not fun and they are not to be desired, but we are blind and deaf if we do not learn from them. That is the setting of John's vision. When the people were stripped down to the essential meaning of life in Christ, they made an astounding discovery. The image of the Christ is not the Emperor or a victorious general parading through town with beaten soldiers and slaves in his entourage. Conjure up all of the things in life that you think are important, and you may be surprised to find that the vision of Christ is a lamb.

As Paul Achtemeier wrote (*Interpretation*, July, 1986, p. 285): "A lamb is not for destiny; a lamb is for slaughter. So too this lamb. 'Between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders, I saw a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain.' Slain indeed, upon a cross, in agony and defeat, the taunts of the enemy echoing as the last sound in dying ears."