

Easter 3C: Revelation 4:1-8, 5:6, 11-14
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Church of the Good Shepherd
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What's on your throne?

A woman and her son had been attending worship for several months, when the minister approached her to ask about baptizing her son. No, she said, she didn't want her son baptized. She wanted to allow him to make his own decision about religion when he was older. She didn't want to "force" him to believe in God.

Now this may seem a funny response coming from a woman who is already taking her son to church, but her attitude is fairly commonplace, shared by many today, seen as open-minded and "enlightened." Religion, we are told, is a personal thing, a private thing, and it's wrong to compel others to believe, even one's own children. Yet this attitude displays a fundamental misunderstanding about religion, about how religion works.

None of us, you see, comes to the question of religion standing on neutral ground, from some objective position from which we can survey all the options of life and make a rational, unbiased decision about whether or not to believe. We all have to stand somewhere. That is to say, we are all formed in some context, brought up by our parents and others to believe in certain things, to behave in certain ways, to accept certain things as right and good and true and deserving of emulation. That's just the way it is, the way we are made as humans. We cannot go through life without having *some* idea about what is most important, what is ultimate, what is deserving of our worship and devotion. If we don't get it from our parents and pastors and teachers, then we'll pick it up from Hollywood or commercials or friends. So, the question is not, Will we believe? or Will we worship?, but rather, *What* will we believe in? *What* will we worship?

You see, each of us has a "throne" set up in our hearts, in our lives. On that throne is whatever is most important to us in the whole universe, whatever is our greatest concern, the thing around which we focus our lives, that which gives us meaning and identity and purpose—in a word, our "god." Now we can put whatever we want on the throne, make whatever we want our "god," but what we can't have is an "empty throne." That is the lie Enlightenment philosophers tried to sell us—that if we could only dethrone the God of the Bible, the throne would be empty and we would have nothing, no ruler, lording itself over us, and we would be free to rule ourselves. It didn't work out quite that way. Dethroning God just meant we put something else on throne in his place—gods of wealth and power, of social status and the state, gods of political ideology and the free market, gods of career and college football, art and astrology, family and fashion, gods we make of our spouses or celebrities, of science and sex—whatever we could come up with to give our lives meaning and purpose. For, we can't live without something to focus our lives around, something to devote ourselves to, something to give ourselves to. We need something to give our lives coherence, in a word something to worship. Just because we are no longer conspicuously religious as our ancient forbears were, setting up altars to make sacrifices to deities, that doesn't mean we have stopped worshipping. Indeed if you want to know what a person worships, you have only to look at what they care the most about, what they spend their money on, what they devote their lives to, what they organize their life around.

Thing is, while we all worship something, not everything we devote ourselves to can bear the weight of our worship. Inevitably we find that the things we exalt as the highest good—career, family, sports, politics, whatever—just do not satisfy us in the end. It's not that any of these are bad; it's just that they were never meant to be our ultimate concern. They were never meant to be the center of our lives. When we lean on them in times of stress, when we need support, they fold, they can't hold up, and we end up disappointed and frustrated. Without support, we are swept up into a vast restlessness, lurching from one partial satisfaction to another, with no steady direction and no sustaining purpose, as so many are today. But, of course, these things weren't meant to support the weight of our worship, to be our center. None of these gods we put on the throne can fill it. They're just too small, too weak, too fragile, too insubstantial.

Now, contrast that with the vision we get in this morning's reading from Revelation. To give you some context, the narrator John has been exiled by the Roman authorities to the island of Patmos in the Mediterranean after a crackdown on Christians. The powers-that-be were fully confident that the empire, and Caesar, the embodiment of the empire, considered divine in himself, was the highest, ultimate power, deserving of worship and devotion by all his subjects. This got Christians in trouble because they refused to accept that and worship the emperor. There was a lot of pressure to conform, to simply give in. Rome was ultimate, the greatest, the highest good, best accept it. John couldn't and so was exiled.

During his exile, John receives this revelation, a vision of the throne room of God, of being in God's presence. Listen to how John describes it. It sounds like something you'd see in a movie with CGI-special effects. The throne room is alive with power and dynamism. Energy flows first to the throne, to the One seated there. He appears iridescent like a gemstone and is haloed by an emerald rainbow, however we might imagine that looks like. Surrounding the throne are two dozen "elders," crowned and in white robes, representing the twelve tribes of Israel and the twelve Apostles, and with them, "four living creatures," angels bearing the faces of a lion, ox, man, and eagle, the noblest, the strongest, the wisest and the swiftest of God's creatures. All attention is directed toward the One seated on the throne to whom the living creatures sing day and night: "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come. Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come."

Energy is directed outward also, away from the throne: the flashes of lightning, the rumblings and peals of thunder, the light pulsing from the throne, which bathes everyone gathered in worship, showing them at their best, picking up all the colors of the spectrum in order to show off God's glories. In this glorious scene we see every sign of life and every impulse to holiness, every bit of beauty and every spark of vitality involved in the worship of the Holy One, the Almighty, who sits upon the throne.

But the One upon the throne is not the sole object of heaven's worship. Beside the throne is a Lamb, which John describes as "standing, as if slain," with "seven horns" and "seven eyes." Never mind what that might look like—the description clearly is to be taken symbolically, not literally, the seven eyes indicating his perfect knowledge just as the seven horns suggest fullness of power. The Lamb himself is of course a symbol of Christ, who has been slain, crucified, yet lives. The Lamb stands beside the throne, next to God, and is with God the recipient of heaven's worship. Upon the Lamb's appearance, John hears the voice of many angels and the living creatures and the elders; together numbering thousands upon thousands, ten thousand times ten thousand, a great multitude singing with full voice, "Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive

power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!” In other words, every acclaim is given to the Lamb, for he is “worthy.”

Worthy is the Lamb, worthy of power, wealth, wisdom, might, honor, glory and blessing. In other words, worthy of our worship. The two necessarily go together. You see, *worship* comes from the old English word “worth-ship.” We worship what to us is worthy. The Lamb alone, with God, is worthy of our worship, is what this scene tells us. While everyone in his day went around shouting “Worthy! Worthy! Worthy is the emperor!” whenever Caesar appeared in public, God has here pulled back the curtain, cleared up all the noise of imperial propaganda, and revealed what is truly at the center, what is ultimate, what is worthy and deserving of our worship.

And if that wasn’t enough, the chorus of praise then expands even further. “Every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them” start singing, joining the elders and angelic choir, “To the One seated on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!” Now, all of creation, everything in heaven and earth, is united in praise. “Let us give thanks unto the Lord,” says the minister in some of the oldest orders of worship of the church, to which the congregation replies: “It is meet and right so to do.” Meet, right, proper, fitting, even cosmically inevitable—what could be more natural to the creation than the praise of its creator? That is what it was created to do—to give glory to God.

Here in this scene we are given a new vision—an Easter vision— of worship, worship in its highest, fullest expression. This is worship as it should be, as it will be in the end. Indeed, what we see here is a picture of where the whole creation is headed when God’s will is done on earth as in heaven. This is what it will be like when God’s Great Rescue Plan is complete and all is restored to the way it was intended to be and everything that God created rediscovers its relationship to its creator—when that happens, anything and everything will rejoice in song!

Scenes like this are what prompted Mark Twain to quip that Christians make heaven sound like one never-ending choir practice, and if that was what heaven is like, he didn’t think he would bother trying for it. But Twain was missing the point. Think back, for a moment, to the best concert you’ve ever been to, the most engaging movie you’ve ever seen. You’re in a crowd, alive with excitement, as you sing along to your favorite songs, and you feel captured, carried away, lost in a moment of ecstasy and joy and oneness with those around you. For when we enjoy ourselves, really enjoy ourselves, we cannot help but offer praise and, more than that, to urge others to join us in praising it: “Isn’t she lovely? Wasn’t it glorious? Don’t you think that was magnificent?” That’s what it will be like when we are in the presence of God, glorifying God and enjoying him forever.

Indeed, that is what worship is supposed to be like now. I know that can seem like a stretch, to be able to see beyond the hard pews, archaic traditions, and sometimes dull sermons and realize that when we worship together, we are standing before the throne of God, surrounded by the saints and angels of God, caught up in the collective praise of the One who created and redeemed us by his blood, the Lamb that was slain. In western churches, we tend to speak of God coming down, coming to our world, but in the East, among Orthodox Christians, for instance, there is a much greater understanding of how in worship, it’s not that God comes down, but rather we are taken up, transported, like John, into heaven, into God’s very presence. We enter a new world. This

isn't an escape from reality, but rather we enter into what is really real, true reality. It's as if when we worship, it's not simply that heaven is introduced into the earth, but earth is introduced to heaven.

And when that happens, we cannot help but be transformed. Indeed, in worshipping God, in surrendering ourselves, giving over our hearts and minds and imaginations to God, we are changed, our lives turned around. Instead of living as if we ourselves are the hub of reality, the world revolving around us, as we are led to believe, in the church's worship our lives become centered in God. And we learn to live in response to and from this center, rather than living *eccentric*, or "off-centered," lives, by worshipping something that isn't the center. In coming together each week to worship, regularly being reminded to put God on the "throne" in our lives, we find that our desires and longings, which once ruled our lives, are received, redeemed, and redirected toward more appropriate objects, namely God's purposes. We begin to want what God wants and to see the world as God sees it, to see it not as something to exploit, but as something to love, something created by God for God's glory and which is every day moving closer to our hoped-for end, God's kingdom on earth.

This is what we are made for, what our hearts are restless for, to praise God with all that we are, to give God honor, power, glory, and blessing, singing, "To him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen." Amen, indeed!