

You Were Made for Worship

Revelation 4 and 5

May 5, 2024

It's Revelation, chapters 4 and 5. Well, that's it. That's the sermon, you can all just go home now.

I mean, what do you do with the immense scene of the cosmic glory of God in the reigning Son of God? You can hear the apostle John struggling to put it all into words. *It's like emeralds and rainbows and jasper and carnelian, and there are these four creatures, and they're covered in eyes. And then there's lightning and thunder and harps and incense and nobody stops singing ever. It's crazy!*

The Book of Revelation is what we call "apocalyptic literature." When I hear the word apocalypse my mind immediately goes to a dystopian world of fire and earthquakes and unhinged human violence. But the apostle John speaks of apocalypse in a very different way. John uses the word apocalypse to speak about a great unveiling. John's letter effectively lets us peek behind the curtain of heaven to see what is happening in the courtroom of God. We say that John's letter is apocalyptic because it uncovers the hidden mysteries of the realities of heaven.

And that's exactly what we find in Revelation, chapters 4 and 5. John lifts the veil and gives us a glimpse into that which is hidden. Let's step back and put ourselves in the shoes of these First Century Christians who received this letter. Around fifty years ago, Jesus the Messiah was crucified. Then after three days he rose from the grave, and he walked around with his disciples for forty days.

But then Jesus ascended into heaven, and he hasn't been seen again since. Jesus proved himself to be the true king by conquering death and the grave. But his followers are looking around the world, and it doesn't seem as if Jesus reigns victoriously.

When they look around the world, they see Caesar on a throne, and his power is growing and growing. They also see followers of Jesus being ridiculed, persecuted, and even killed by the powers of this world. You can imagine the questions that would begin to arise in these people's minds: Has our risen and resurrected Lord fallen asleep or forgotten us? Why do we continue to suffer under the hand of Caesar when Jesus is the true king?

And it's with all of these fears swirling that God gives John the gift of the Book of Revelation. John, the pastor and the poet, writes what he sees, and he lets us peek behind the curtain of heaven to see the present reality of Christ and the future hope that we hold in Christ. And it is behind the curtain of heaven that we find Jesus on the throne reigning with all glory and honor and power and the entirety of the heavenly host worshipping him.

Which brings me to the first thing I want you to hear this morning: *You were made for worship.*

John's vision of Jesus on the throne is a pastoral letter to those who feel tossed about by the voices of our world. John lived in a crazy world. His world was full of political strife. There were wars and rumors of wars, and he lived in the midst of a straining church that was trying to find its center in a complicated landscape. Does any of that sound familiar to anyone out there?

His letter was a word of instruction and encouragement to the disheartened and persecuted church. And he emphatically wants you to hear that Jesus is indeed worthy of your worship.

When we don't worship Christ, we are bound to live lives that are manipulated by messages of fear, seduced by flashy advertisements, and enticed by every empty

promise that comes our way. Without worship, we become rudderless ships that are subject to our every impulse and craving. Without worship, we are aimless vagabonds continually traversing the landscape of our lives with no sense of direction. Without worship, our hearing begins to fade, and we lose track of the voice of the good shepherd, and instead we begin listening to all the other voices that war for our attention.

Christian worship is the act that centers us in a world that is full of noisy and competing voices. Worship is the place where we learn the story of who we are and who we are called to be in the world. And worship is the place where we learn that our most foundational identity is beloved child of God.

I was talking with one of our high school students earlier this month, and he was telling me about all the crushing weights of the identities that he is trying to hold. He's a student. He's an athlete. He's a son and a brother. He's an aspiring college student. He's also a boyfriend. And on top of that, he's captive to a world of Instagram expectations and TikTok influencers that are all displaying to him this perfect life. And he was just exhausted. What do you do in a world where everyone demands something of you, and you feel utterly stretched to your limit?

Worship offers another way. You're a child of God! In a world where we are pushed and pulled by so many voices, remember who you are. You're a child of God who is deeply loved by the God of the universe.

It's in worship that we proclaim this true reality. We proclaim that our days are not measured by the opening and closing bells of the stock markets. Our calendars don't revolve around the elections of presidents. Our worth is not determined by our ability to buy the latest piece of technology. In worship we proclaim the true story, that our lives are constituted by the cosmic king who rules from the throne with love.

And if we choose not to worship Christ, we will surely find something else to worship. I like the way the novelist David Foster Wallace puts it. He says, "There

is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship."

Or maybe you prefer the novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky. "So long as man remains free, he strives for nothing so incessantly and so painfully as to find someone to worship."

If we choose to not let our lives be defined by the worship of Christ the king, we will surely find another king to worship.

Israel's original sin was the sin of idolatry. They chose to worship something other than God. They chose to do what was right in their own eyes and to follow gods who could never deliver on their promises. The prophet Isaiah puts it like this: they forsook the spring of living water and instead they dug for themselves cisterns that could hold no water.

Idolatry is also the original sin of the Church. We place our trust in political leaders, in ideologies, in material possessions. We think that the perfect spouse, the perfect family, the perfect career will fulfill us and make us whole. We worship things that we think will make us whole, and we find that we are empty and left wanting.

In our passage this morning, the twenty-four elders that are around the throne are symbolic of the twelve tribes of Israel and the twelve disciples of the New Testament. It's almost as if the culmination of the old and the new covenants being brought together, and they're all encircling the throne. And did you catch what they're wearing? They're clothed in white robes. All of Israel's wandering and their mistakes, all of the church's brokenness and its faithlessness, is made new by the lamb who was slaughtered. That's the story that you're invited into. You too can be made new!

John wants to renew our imaginations and remind us of the story that we belong to. I mean, play around with me for a moment this morning. What if it's actually true that you're not defined by a past that you can't change, but that in Jesus you could be brought into a future in which you *can* be changed? What if it's true that through the lamb you too could be made new?

And that which God saves and makes new he never saves in order to be stagnant. What God redeems, he sends. What God restores, he always turns into a witness. That's the story of the Bible. Broken people who God encounters, sets free, and then sends out to be his witnesses in the world.

Our seniors in high school this year have been learning about the apostle Paul as we prepare to travel in the footsteps of Paul on a trip this summer. And this guy... We've been learning about this guy. He was an absolute disaster! He was a persecutor of the Church. He arrested Christians. He even stood by as a man named Stephen was stoned, and he said "I'll hold your coats," as they stoned him.

And then God encounters Paul. He sets him free, and he sends him out. Paul, who had a history and a past that he probably would have rather kept a secret, is told to go and share his story of deliverance with the world.

And what if that's true of you too? What if God wants to make you new, and turn your story into a song of deliverance for the world?

So often we want to reduce worship to an activity that happens on a Sunday morning, but John is not content with that half vision. We want worship to be a noun, something that takes place on specified hours on a Sunday morning, but the apostle John insists that it's a verb that animates every aspect of our life.

The stunning way that John puts this is he says we have been made a kingdom of priests to serve God right here on earth. John's vision is that worship spills over into the priestly work that each of us is called to in our daily lives.

Each of us is called to be a mediator between God and the people. In the Old Testament, a priest served as a mediator between God and the nations. Priests would intercede on behalf of the people and would serve as a representative to God. And John's shocking claim is that through the finished work of Jesus, each of us is called to be a priest right here on earth.

The priestly work that each of us engages happens right here in the world that we live in. You're called to be a priest in your neighborhood, in your workplace, in the restaurants and in the coffee shops that you frequent on a weekly basis. Your act of worship is to offer your life as a living sacrifice to God in the places that he has put you.

There are so many people who do not know that their life is hidden in Christ. They don't know that the lamb was slain on their behalf and that they can find their belonging in Christ. They don't know that they've been invited into the story of God's deliverance and that they have been claimed as children of God through Jesus Christ.

And this world, it's so broken and in need of God's justice. What if your priestly work is to put yourself in the breach and to say no to the injustice and the inequity that plague God's children? Your hands, your heart, your mind are all needed for this priestly work. You and all of the you-ness that makes you *you* is needed to bring God's justice right here and right now. We worship when we live lives of hospitality, generosity, and justice for the world that God so loves.

Hear this this morning: worship which does not lead to loving our neighbors and the world that God so loves has missed the point.

All the evidence that we need to know that God cares deeply about the realities of our world are found in Jesus' calloused hands that wielded workman's tools and in his dusty feet that traveled on desert roads. God is the one who entered into the finite realities of our world, and he is deeply concerned about the earthiness of our everyday lives.

John's revelation assures us that the line between earth and heaven is so much more thin and fragile than we ever imagined. He paints a picture where heaven and earth are continually splashing over into one another.

And it's really remarkable. In our passage, we're told that the prayers that we pray here on earth become incense in the heavenly places of God. And John insists

that the realities of heaven make us priests right here on earth. That line that we think separates heaven and earth is so thin.

Every week we gather to pray the Lord's prayer. We pray for God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. And that is John's vision! That the justice and love of God would get all tangled up right here at 7700 Meridian and in all the places that we live. Our priestly work is to live in a way that the finished work of the lamb shapes all the ways that we work, live, and play in this world.

If our contemplation of heaven causes us to neglect the work that God is doing right here on earth, we have missed the point. This earth is the place that God longs to restore. This is the place that God longs to make new. I like the way Eugene Peterson puts it. He says, "All dematerialized spiritualities are vacant lots."

Our worship is the praise and the contemplation of Christ on the throne, and it's the work of our hands to bring peace and justice to a hurting world. This is the world that God so loves. And God is making it new right now. And he calls each of us to be priests in that work.

Since this is my first and last sermon that I get to share with you all, I want to end by offering you a verse from the book of Phillipians that has been really important to me. It's not too long, and I wonder if you might even commit it to memory this week.

It goes like this: "Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ."

Only. In everything you do, in every area of your life, in every relationship that you have, in every place you inhabit, in every work meeting that surely could have been an email, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.

Friends, the Christian life is so simple that you can begin it today, and it's so deep that you could never exhaust it if you chased it your whole life.

Be a people of worship. Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.