

Apr. 22, 2018

Lesson 8: The Lord God the Almighty

Scripture: Revelation 4:1-6, 8-11

Context:

Our next two lessons take us to the end of the Bible. We jump from the resurrection narratives to the book of Revelation. Often the book of Revelation has been a misinterpreted book. There are those who have used it to give God's final plan for "the end of the earth," with images of doom and gloom. However, that is not the purpose in the composition of the book. The book is to be read as a hopeful and uplifting with a glimpse into the early church and the movements taking place in the ancient world.

Our scripture lesson today starts in chapter four, which is the beginning of visions that celebrate God's kingdom on earth. When reading these chapters, we are to look more at the glory and wonder of God instead of trying to come out with a step-by-step plan of how God works. This chapter starts this structure as the author is making the point that Christ comes not at the end of history, but the one who has already come.¹ Salvation is not an experience as something that comes later, but something that takes place in the struggles of the early church.

As we go into chapter four, we are transported into a vision of what John envisions for the time he is in, not for some future "rapture" that will take place. John gives his own experience of encountering "the holy." The journey with John reveals a glimpse into where God dwells. What follows is an incredible scene with jewels, torches, a glass sea, elders, creatures, and thrones. The scene evokes awe and wonder about the mighty God. The focus is on worshipping God with the refrain: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is coming." There is glory, honor, and pure worship as all bow before God, bowing and throwing down their own crowns.

The scenes are very reminiscent of the visions we find in the books of Ezekiel and Daniel. They are detailed and full of allusions to the power of God. Rainbows remind us of the covenant God made with humanity after the flood. Crowns remind us of the powers of the world and what earthly kings wore. The lightning, voices, and thunder remind us of God showing up at Mt. Sinai. John was taking all the visual cues of wonder in his day to provide a glimpse of the majesty of God. As the elders bow before God constantly casting their crowns before the throne, we are reminded that God is our audience and he is the one who sits on the throne. We are but humble servants despite whatever high earthly positions we hold. John wants the readers and the early church to realize that God is the true monarch and the one who ultimately holds power.

Application:

Today we are reminded of the importance of symbols in both ritual and worship. John's vision gives us a glimpse into the holy and how even the most descriptive human symbols cannot explain the full majesty of God. Yet they can give us clues that inform how we live our lives and how we worship God.

¹ M. Eugene Boring, "Revelation," *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (John Knox Press; Louisville, KY 1989), 99.

As we read of the different symbols of the vision, I am reminded of the symbols we associate with the Christian faith. Symbols are important because they are physical representations that carry meaning. They are also important for people who are visual learners. That is one of the reasons that I think it is important for churches to have symbols in somewhere in the main worshiping spaces. A baptismal font reminds us of our baptism. An altar table reminds us of Holy Communion. A cross reminds us of Jesus' death and atoning for our sins. All of these are important symbols that I believe need to be in every place of worship whether the serve is contemporary, blended, or traditional.

For some though, there may be a need for even more symbolism. Stained glass windows for years have been used not to show off wealth, but for people to see the story of scripture. At the current church I serve, FUMC Dothan, our stained glass windows tell the story of Christ. At the bottom of each of the pictures, there is a symbol for how that translates to the story of Christ. Under the baptism of our Lord is the shell with water beads coming off of it. Now whenever I got to the beach, I am reminded of Jesus and his baptism. These symbols help me reflect on God in all sorts of places. What symbols remind you of God? And which ones are you favorites?

The other important part of this text is the focus on worship and the refrain mentioned in the chapter: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is coming." We are reminded that part of worship is repetition. Even in contemporary worship, the music and other elements trace their roots to scripture and older hymns. There is power in certain words much like the phrase: "Christ has died. Christ has risen. Christ will come again." My prayer for any worship service is that we will remember that the service should seek to glorify and honor God.

Recently a friend sent me a quote that summarizes how we are to see worship: "When ministry becomes performance, then the sanctuary becomes a theater, the congregation becomes entertainment, and man's applause and approval become the measure of success. But when ministry is for the glory of God, his presence moves into the sanctuary. Even the unsaved visitor will fall down on his face, worship God, and confess that God is among us." We are reminded that worship is not about us. It is not about our personal preferences or if we feel "fed," or entertained. If our goal is to bring more people in so that they feel like they've attended a rock concert or a show, then we have failed as a body of believers. If we are more concerned about flashing lights or what "caters" to this group of people, then we have fallen to worshipping the god of entertainment and performance.

This is not to say that we should examine worship from time to time and ask about ways we could do things better or adding something. Worship often involves details that need to be addressed in order for things to flow well. Sometimes it is time to reexamine a tradition and to take it out of a worship service. Sometimes it is important to add something that glorifies God and allows people to use their gifts in corporate worship. Those are things that are important to any ministry. A check-up always keeps us healthy and alert to things we may need to examine. What acts of worship do you see that glorify God? How do you see people being connected to God? Those are the important things for us to consider as people of faith and how we approach the throne of the living God.

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