

Sunday January 30, 2022
 Lesson 9: Joining the Choir of Angels
 Scripture: Revelation 19: 1-10

Context:

The winter Adult Bible Studies Curriculum continues its focus on engaging the world with the unit entitled “Wonder.” This set of lessons in the season of Epiphany will focus on how we are called to a sense of wonder in our faith. As we look to the glory of God, we are transformed and can engage in the world in new ways as disciples of Jesus. Today we learn to acknowledge only God is worthy of worship.

Our lesson comes from the book of Revelation, the last book in the Christian canon. Scholars sometimes divide the book of Revelation into three major divisions and note how each division begins with a transcendent scene of the glory of God and/or Christ, from which the rest of the vision unfolds.¹ The final division begins with the passage for today as the twenty-four elders worship and surround God who is seated on the throne of the heavens. There is a voice to cry out like in the other divisions and various acts of worship are observed.

The beginning acts of worship are those of praise. God is praised with acclamations of “Hallelujah” and the celebration of the victory acclamation of, “Salvation and glory and power belong to our God.”² God’s eternal reign is proclaimed, and, in the liturgy, there is the story of God. The usurpers like the prostitute have fallen and now God judges all. It is important that God’s justice finally prevails, and the people hear in the liturgy how evil never wins.³ The liturgy tells how God’s power is more powerful than those who believe they control the fate of the universe and who is truly in charge.

The vision continues with John hearing something along the lines of a great crowd surging towards him. They are singing hymns of praise and celebrate the past judgment of God on Babylon and announce the festive celebration to come: the marriage feast of the Lamb.⁴ Using the allusion of a bridal party helps to issue an invitation to the reader to come and be a part of something which gives joy to all.

After the praise is sung, the words are explained by the angel to John. John then falls to his knees to worship, but the angel warns him not to worship him. Instead, he tells him to worship God and to focus on the testimony of connecting one’s story to God. This speaks to the times as some churches in Asia had angels being exalted, confusing their

¹ Boring, Eugene. “Revelation.” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2011), 191.

² *Ibid.*, 192.

³ *Ibid.*, 193.

⁴ *Ibid.*

role with that of Christ.⁵ John's vision would recenter them, helping them to see the only one to worship was Jesus Christ.

Application

I will never forget reading a commentary on the Book of Revelation and having an epiphany when the author, N.T. Wright, said the book was on worship. As I went through the book, I saw what he meant as there were so many symbols and forms of praise. The most beautiful scenes to me were the scenes of worship, like the passage we read today.

While I know many people who like to think of heavenly worship as something only reserved for the heavens and as an encounter for when we die, I cannot help but marvel at how worship gives us a glimpse of heaven every time we gather. My professor Bishop Pennel once said in a class on preaching how the great hour of worship on Sunday, or whenever Christians gather together for worship, is when heaven comes to earth and we receive a taste of the goodness of God.

Indeed, my prayer is all Christians might experience worship as a place where we are transported to the great throne room of God, and we are given the opportunity to praise the lamb of God. We can be swept into something which transcends words and where we offer the best of what we possess before God. We are given the privilege to participate in the story of God and join in celebration with those around us.

Yet if the scene from Revelation tells us anything, it is how worshipping God is not an individual event. This is not to say we will not experience the mystery and awe of God on our own. Of course, when we go on a hike or a run or play a sport, we might find a moment where we are caught in something larger than ourselves. We might even get more out of understanding in the holy scriptures when we sit down by ourselves and dig into the text, noticing things we've never seen before. All of those are wonderful ways we connect to God, and they are disciplines we should seek out on our own spiritual development.

Our diet is lacking though when we abstain from corporate worship. Or even worse, when we turn worship into a spectator sport where few participate, and the masses are told to be entertained instead of offering themselves up in praise and thanksgiving. Whether liturgical, contemporary, ancient traditions, or blended, worship is never primarily about one individual or one group of people. Worship is meant to be participatory, inviting all present to be able to engage in some way to glorify God.

The book of Revelation has worship scenes where so many individuals play a role. There are the twenty-four elders who lead in the posturing of worship, the voice who leads in the liturgy, and then the crowd where every voice sings with praise for the mighty God. And there is even a warning for John and for us: don't just worship the angel. Worship God.

Hopefully we've figured out how this plays out for us today. As we look to worship, we are looking for the opportunity to praise God. It's not just about the band or the chancel choir who sing praises. It is not about the perfection of the minister's sermon or anything about them. Coming to worship is about receiving the invitation for all to come and worship God, with all as important to bringing something to participate in the

⁵ Ibid., 194.

taste of heaven. God is who we worship when we gather together; not the band, not the choir, and not the preacher. God is alone the one worthy to receive our praise.

How does corporate worship give us a glimpse of the heavens? Why is it so important worship include different voices and various people? What happens in corporate worship if only one person or group participates or leads? Why do you think worship is meant to be a corporate event? How will help lead in worship when given the opportunity the next time you gather with your community of faith?

Rev. Dr. E. Hunter Pugh
Pastor of Brantley – Brunson Chapel Charge
PO Box 71
Brantley, AL 36009