

“Diving Into Revelation”

(Revelation 4)

On Tuesday, in-between the drenching downpours, I was standing outside surveying my poor flowers which were swimming, doing the back float in pools of standing water. As I looked up toward one side of the sky I noticed there was this translucent quality at that moment, with light grey giving way to a muted blue and it looked like at any second the sun was going to break through the clouds and you'd need to cue the music from Handel's *Messiah*. There was this mysterious feeling that along with the refreshing, almost chilly breeze after the rain sent shivers through me. Then, I glanced to the other side, I turned my head one hundred eighty degrees to see ominous clouds still lingering, threatening more torrential rain. Caught in-between a moment of awe and the reality of how quickly things can change around us; I was struck by how those were some of the same feelings as I read through the book of Revelation recently.

To be sure, there is reluctance to reading Revelation within the church today. The images are disorienting, they come at a dizzying pace and some are downright disturbing. When you couple that with the unquenchable fascination of using Revelation to figure out just when the rapture, which by the way is never even mentioned in the book, and trying to pinpoint Christ's return might happen have left many wondering, why bother. Yet, when I read John's words at funerals about God wiping every tear drop from our eyes, I feel reassured and comforted. When John envisions a world where a tree, whose fruit in Genesis leads to brokenness, now the single tree finds a mate in Revelation and the leaves of both are for the healing of the nations that is my dream of the world my children will know. So, I am reluctant, honestly I am stubborn, like Jacob who wrestled with the angel, to let this book go without some kind of blessing, even if it causes me to limp.

And yet, you don't have to wait until the ending of Revelation to catch your first glimpse of the awe and beauty of this sacred text. Early on in John's vision, we walk with him through heaven's door. Now this is an image John used first at the end of chapter three with Jesus knocking on the door to the church at Laodicea and we are left wondering if he was going to be let in. The closed door of the church in chapter 3 is contrasted to heaven's door which stands wide open. John is beckoned through the door by the same voice that greeted him in chapter one, that he says sounds like a trumpet. Stay with me on that image for just a moment. For about three years I played in my high school jazz band behind a row of trumpets. And I remember moments when the brassy, bright sound would carry the melody and I would be washed and my missed notes thankfully drowned out. But the trumpet is an amazing instrument, because almost instantly it could go from blaring to a soothing, soulful, soft tone, think here of that smoky jazz sound of someone like Louie Armstrong playing, *What a Wonderful World* that just seems to slow your whole being down when you hear it.

And so, whatever the tone of the trumpet, the sound compels John and at the center of this sacred heavenly scene is a throne that captivates his attention. Actually, it is the being on the throne, and John describes this being as looking like jasper and carnelian. Now if you are like me and grew up with only eight crayons in your Crayola box, he is essentially saying the being was red and reddish. To which I say, thanks for clearing that up, John. Perhaps what would have been awoken in the imagination of the first listeners is that of Moses standing sandal-less before a burning bush that is not consumed or maybe he was simply trying to preserve a sense of mystery with God. Either way, John plows forward with the vision focusing on the twenty-four elders with golden crowns. Some speculate that the elders reflect the twelve tribes of Israel plus the twelve apostles, while others say our attempts to translate historically or rationally what Revelation meant have been forever lost. What I am struck by is the response of these elders, who in the midst of thunder and lightning, sounds that can still give me the heebie-jeebies or make me jump, cast down their crowns as a sign of deference, reverence, and worship. What do we cast down when we worship? What defenses do we lower in the presence of God?

Around the throne is the sea of glass, like crystal. Water will appear again at the end of Revelation, a bright gentle stream that flows past the two trees. That image of a glassy sea, a calm sea, a Psalm 23 body of water that is not turbulent or chaotic like the water at the start of creation, but a sea that reflects back a radiant red of the throne.

Beside the twenty four elders there are these four creatures that Eugene Boring says represents creation. The eagle to represent the air; the ox to symbolize domestic animals, the lion to represent Disney's best loved musical or wild creatures, and the human, not above or apart from the other creatures but as connected and equal with all creation. Now creatures as part of a heavenly vision of worship are not John's original idea. Isaiah talks of cherubim with six wings; who fly with two wings, cover their eyes with two wings and cover their feet with two wings. Ezekiel encounters four creatures at the beginning of his book, but his creatures only have four wings and four faces and a glassy sea. So, there is this tradition within scripture that we might think of as odd or otherworldly, but point us to an important truth about worship. When you step back you hear tones of creation, all God's handiwork, joining in the celebration of worship. That's really what this moment John experiences is all about. Worship and singing with gusto to the presence of the One who awakens a beautiful melody. Both the creatures and the elders sing out with full voice in the presence of God.

When we hear this vision, it seems natural to step back and consider our own worship, what we are doing here. Does our worship center us, awaken for us, beckon and draw us closer to God? Does this hour we spend singing and praying and listening help re-orient us and remind us who is at the very center of our lives? Do we leave here feeling like we've been honest? Does our time here awaken a hymn of genuine praise? And if not, how might Revelation's vision of what worship can be, will be, compel us or challenge us to name how we can enter into worship in such a way that will open us to and transform us by the very presence of God here and now?

For me, and this comes as no surprise to you, singing is one way that can open us to the profound, indescribable presence of God. As notes reverberate from my very center and words cling to a melody falling from my mouth, there is something different about that moment. Most of us know the liturgical cycle not by the color of the cloths on the altar, but by the words we sing to God and each other. We know it is Advent with the minor melody of "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel". We know it is Christmas with the sweet, soft sound of "Silent Night." We know it is Lent when we prayerfully sing for God to "Abide with Me." We know it is Easter when we shift and our whole sanctuary is filled with the joyful refrain, "Christ the Lord is Risen Today." Music guides us through the church calendar. And hymns offer us a chance to sing the truth of what each season means. Hymns also speak truth of the One we sing out with gusto to; our God who listens to prayers, moves in the most unlikely and usual ways at the most unexpected times, God who is close as our next breath and whose mystery will always confound us and keeps us coming back next Sunday to encounter the sacred in new ways that awakens a new song for the new day.

And so, here is the conversation I'd like to see continue going throughout the summer and into next fall. First, when is it in worship that you, like John, get swept up and steeped in the sacred? Now, **this is not about what you like or your preference**, there is a subtle difference. I am inviting you to think about moments that cause goose bumps to form on your arms and a glassy sea, indescribable peacefulness throughout your whole being. When do you experience openness and reverence that you might not even fully understand? That's the first question. Second, how do we prayerfully keep God at the center of what we are about, as the One to whom our words and listening hearts and presences are fully open? Often I can get struck with cerebral-itis, I start to think too much and over analyze. Worship, singing together, praying alongside each other, breathing in scripture together, that helps re-orient and remind me whose I am and whose presence sustains me in all times. I pray those two invitations about where you find the sacred in our worship and how we can keep God at the center of what we are about will prompt your response. I pray you will respond to

this invitation and take the leap with me through the door to that wonderful mysterious and sacred place where we encounter the One who causes our lives to flow on in endless song.

Thanks be to God and let all God's people say, "Amen."