

READINGS From Revelation (4,5,7):

**Chapter 4: (Introduction to Heavenly Worship:
Describing what happens around the throne of God,
there are 4 creatures – like a lion, like an ox, like a
human, and like an eagle - and 24 elders in white)**

Day and night without ceasing they sing,

“Holy, holy, holy,
the Lord God the Almighty,
who was and is and is to come.”

⁹And whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to the one who is seated on the throne, who lives forever and ever, ¹⁰the twenty-four elders fall before the one who is seated on the throne and worship the one who lives forever and ever; they cast their crowns before the throne, singing,

¹¹“You are worthy, our Lord and God,
to receive glory and honor and power,
for you created all things,
and by your will they existed and were created.”

Chapter 5: (Describing the Lamb, the one who has been slaughtered, who has come to open the seven seals)

⁹They sing a new song:

“You are worthy to take the scroll
and to open its seals,

for you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God
saints from^[b] every tribe and language and people and nation;

¹⁰you have made them to be a kingdom and priests serving^[c] our God,
and they will reign on earth.”

¹¹Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels surrounding the
throne and the living creatures and the elders; they numbered myriads of
myriads and thousands of thousands, ¹²singing with full voice,

“Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered
to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might
and honor and glory and blessing!”

¹³Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth
and in the sea, and all that is in them, singing,

“To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb
be blessing and honor and glory and might
forever and ever!”

¹⁴And the four living creatures said, “Amen!” And the elders fell down and
worshiped.

CHAPTER 7: (The multitude of the saved, from every tribe and nation arrive in heaven)

⁹After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. ¹⁰They cried out in a loud voice, saying,

“Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!”

¹¹And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, ¹²singing,

“Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.”

Kerra Becker English

“Singing and Praising in Heaven”

Excerpts from Revelation 4, 5, 7

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Very few of us would attempt to describe heaven. It is, after all, the great unknown. John’s description of it in the book of Revelation is freaky enough. It seems more like a morphine-induced hallucination or a very vivid dream than it seems like a place we’re all trying to get to one day. He talks about God’s ornate throne, and strange multi-eyed animals, and elders dressed in white, and scrolls sealed up with the knowledge of future events to be opened by a sacrificial Lamb. It is an unusual book, ridiculous to be taken literally because it is so obviously a book of visions and symbols.

The difficulty though with visions and symbols is that they get interpreted, then re-interpreted so often. A static symbol is usually a dead one. Take the swastika for instance. At one point it was known as a religious symbol, a cross, and a sign for auspiciousness or luck. But after its use by the Nazi party, today we can think of it as signifying only one thing – Nazi hate and cruelty. Symbols that continue to carry weight tend to be multi-faceted. You turn it this way, and it means this, read it at a different time and it means that. They are slippery and elusive – but those who had a say in bringing us our sacred text in its current form did not scrub the text of its symbols thinking that one day we might not get what they meant. Instead, we have inherited a widespread use of symbols throughout our scripture, this book being particularly daunting for its use of imaginative language.

So the middle chapters of Revelation are descriptive of God's place in heaven, again something we usually choose to remain quiet about in our orderly Presbyterian ways. We don't attempt to calculate the numerology of the 7 seals or 144,000 saved. It's not in our nature. We don't promise streets paved with gold, or glimpses of the seraphim at our memorial services. And yet, in reading through these odd chapters, I found significant evidence of something we might find in a compelling vision of heaven. In heaven, angels and animals and people are doing a LOT of singing and praising.

Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty, early in the morning our song shall rise to thee. All things bright and beautiful, the Lord God made them all. And John, in his vision, heard every creature, all the lot of them, singing. He leaves none of them out whether they are in heaven, or on the earth, or under the earth, or in the sea – all God's creatures are singing! Amen and amen.

That's what knowing Jesus does to us. At least that's how John's vision manifests itself. We are amazed by God's power. We are enraptured with Christ's love. We are moved then by the Spirit to sing and to praise – giving honor and glory to God.

That's a primary part of John's vision of heaven – singing. It makes sense, right? Go into any nursing home, and the people there who may hesitate to know what day of the week it is, who couldn't tell you who the current President is, know all the words to their favorite hymns. They remember the songs. They know the feelings. They can still, even the grumbliest among them, find ways to offer praise.

Praise seems to be a part of our human DNA. John's vision reminds us that it may be in the DNA of all living things to be grateful for being alive, to desire to give thanks and honor to our Creator. This is about joy, and heaven seems designed to mimic the joy we know here.

That's why I always feel that it's important to emphasize to people who come to me concerned about death that what they find most joyful here may be exactly the kind of joy they will know in the time beyond our earthly existence. If they are joyful around family – they will be reunited with family. If they loved their pets – there will be dogs and cats glad to see we've come home. If they were dreadfully off-pitch but joy-filled singers, they might find their heavenly voice to be spectacular. My Dad, who is ever the outdoorsman, I know hopes to still wander in the blessed peace of a West Virginia forest. If it made sense for John to have his spectacular vision of what praise looks like in heaven, I think we too can imagine it to be all the joy we can possibly fathom.

I feel certain that there will be singing and dancing and abundant joy in heaven. And yet, we are living the lives that we know right here. Who will remind us that there is singing, and dancing, and abundant joy in the present? Who will help us hear God's voice ringing out in birdsong, and ocean wave, and thunderstorm? Who will help us inhale deeply of the breath of life? Who will touch our hearts and remind us that joy is not only a gift but our birthright?

It is the work of the visionaries, the dreamers, the artists. It is odd for us to turn to this strange book and call it Revelation, and yet, that which is revealed is often also surprising. We find it hard to believe. Its truth has been hidden – somewhere deep in the ordinariness of life. We need the eyes to see what is right in front of us, what **has been** right in front of us all along. And sometimes it takes a fantastical kind of story for us to get there.

And then we also need a few interpreters, because visionaries, dreamers and artists often need a few practical folks to bring their inspiration into reality. That's probably more where I come in. I like to work with the symbols and bring them into perspective for daily life. The

preacher's job isn't often to tell the story; it's to *re-tell* the story in such a way that her congregation might hear themselves in it. I want you to see that the praise, and joy, and wonder isn't just about fantastical creatures with eyes all over their bodies, it's about you and me being able to see God in all things.

But being truthful, it's not just about artists, or dreamers, or interpreters, it's about us all because those things are the human work of making meaning out of life. And in this case, it's also about us seeking meaning in the life that exists outside of our realm of knowing. We're talking about heaven, and we can only do so because we can imagine it to be true, even if our empirical knowledge of heaven is lacking. Imagination is a key gift of the Spirit, though we don't acknowledge it nearly often enough.

Our elders, deacons, and ministers promise to bring their energy, imagination, intelligence, and love to the work of the church – but the imagination part is often ignored because we have been taught to have greater appreciation for practicality and common sense. Reading Revelation over these next few weeks I hope will spark something a little bit different, a little less common. I hope we will see beyond our usual seeing and exercise the gifts of our imagination. Today, we'll start with something we know, imagine heaven filled with singing, the singing you like – praiseful, joyful, beautifully sorrowful, exquisitely rhythmic – whatever music brings you next to God today – that's what heaven sounds like. Maybe that's what heaven begins to look like too. Imagine that. Amen.

Charge to Melissa:

You have been called by God. Period. I know there are still looming questions out there about seeking ordination and wondering you are being led to stay in business, or take a call to ministry, or whether some kind of business in ministry track will emerge. The “What will I do with my life?” question is always such a difficult one. However, one of the things I learned from Ben Campbell at Richmond Hill is that “location” and “vocation” go together, and you have to know your location first before you can get vocation right. Here’s what he means by that. You have to know where you are before you can ever answer the question about what you are called to do. And the “Where am I?” question is pretty broad. It could be answered with geography. I live and work in Richmond and in Hanover County. It could be answered with the current activities consuming your life. I am in my next to last year of seminary and work for the Hanover Chamber. It could be about family status, or occupation, or stage of faith. But it’s in knowing who you are, really deeply who you are that will lead you to where you and God can do your best work together. Location signifies something deeper. Are you right where you need to be in life? If so, the other parts seem to fall readily into place. Seeking vocation without knowing yourself can lead to disastrous choices. You and I both know that some people who take calls in the ministry probably should be steering a much wider berth from the profession.

The fact that you have been taking the location question so seriously makes me think that God has tremendous plans for you that just haven’t been revealed quite yet. You sought seminary, not to check off something for a resume, but to learn something deeply about yourself

and about God. You ask the important questions. You have listened with great interest to the wisdom so available to you through the faithfulness of the people of this church. You know how to offer praise, and your praise is not diminished by the difficulties of life, rather it shines more brilliantly because of knowing hardship and heartache.

Those qualities already make you a gifted preacher, and a loving pastor. Not to diminish the ordination process, it has its place, but it really is just a confirmation process and a piece of paper acknowledging what God has already been doing in someone's life.

So I thank you Melissa for sharing a piece of your journey with me and with this congregation. We have been quite pleased to be the location for your internship, but hopefully we ended up being the right spiritual location as well. We pray for the gifts to be a teaching church, but sometimes we find that we are a blessed a thousand times over for any of the gifts we are able to offer. I pray that God will continue to help you root yourself in the question, "Where am I?" because it will lead precisely to what you are to be doing as well. Blessings and peace – from me and from your adopted Ashland church family.

Benediction:

¹⁵ For this reason they are before the throne of God,
and worship him day and night within his temple,
and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them.

¹⁶ They will hunger no more, and thirst no more;
the sun will not strike them,
nor any scorching heat;

¹⁷ for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their
shepherd,
and he will guide them to springs of the water of life,
and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”