

A Sermon for DaySpring

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The Heart of Worship

Revelation 5

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The magnificent scene in Revelation 5 is a picture of worship, the ultimate picture of worship. The ultimate and enduring and everlasting and most high and most glorious picture of worship. One quickly runs out of superlatives to describe the scene laid out before us humble creatures via the vision of John, who was given a glimpse behind the veil and so gave us Revelation.

Not everyone thinks Revelation is their cup of tea. The apocalyptic images are just too intense or extreme for their tastes. And so, some ignore it as if it's not really there at the end of the Bible. Others got the opposite direction and become obsessed with it and make a sport of pinning it to the mat it by cramming its images into their own little worlds, in their own little times, assigning specific present-day meanings to ancient symbols. That's far too small. The themes of Revelation are enduring and universal, but they're not here to serve you and your geopolitical anxieties.

That's one of the great ironies of much interpretation of Revelation. Some people make it about them and what they can see. It's not about you and what you can see. It's about God and what we cannot see, except in glimpses and images and songs. Revelation is painted on a big canvas; that's another reason why it's not everyone's cup of tea all the time. Sometimes, we are just not in a place to see a big canvas; we need help just getting through this day, dealing with this problem. We fret about this situation or have this particular regret that is heavy on our hearts. Life is a collection of small moments, and in those small moments, we're just not always in a place where we can see the big picture. Revelation is the big picture, the big canvas. It's about things that matter. Revelation is for people who are in times and places of consequence—whether that is in joy, uncertainty, or sorrow, they are able to lift their hearts and their eyes to things that matter. There's a lot of things in life that don't really matter all that much, but still get our attention. There are a lot of things in life that claim to matter a lot, but really don't. Revelation's themes are what matters: life, death, beginnings, endings, grief, fear, suffering, hope, worship.

Revelation is beginning to end, start to finish, and run through: a vision of worship. In the fifth chapter especially, the sights, smells, and sounds of worship infuse the vision. In the vision, we hear the refrain over and over that makes the heartbeat of worship:

You are worthy. God, you are worthy.

You are worthy to receive glory, honor, power, for you are creator.

You are worthy, Christ, for you were slain and ransomed people from every tribe and language, and people and nation.

You are worthy to receive all that we have to offer and more.

To you be blessing, honor, glory, might for ever and ever.

This is not a bad start to define worship: worship in the Liturgy of a Sunday morning or the liturgies of our daily lives in reverence to what matters very most and so what orders your thoughts, loves, and life.

This is a story about worship. And so is DaySpring's story. This, too, is a story about worship and things that matter most. From the beginning of DaySpring's life together, worship was at the heart of the vision of the church. Those who gathered at the beginning with the seed of a church in their relationships had a blank canvas for church life in front of them and asked: what's first. What's in the center of this composition? Worship, they said. These were folks who had been part of church for a long time, all their lives in some cases, and they knew that church life has a tendency to be drawn toward busyness. Busyness takes different shapes and none of them are bad on their own: administration, programs, committees, management, buildings. There's nothing inherently bad there, but they knew, because they'd experienced it themselves, that church life can become swamped with it all so that even the church's worship can feel like another program in service to other things in the church's life where everything keeps the machine of the organization running. One author years ago called the church the great apostolic blunder machine. Such a cynical view, but also, there's a point there somewhere worth paying attention to when we know the allure of programmatic busyness substituting for the one thing that matters.

"What could this church be?" they asked, even before they had the name of it in their hearts. What could we be? A congregation where worship is central to everything else we do, even if we don't do anything else. And if we do anything else, anything else we do flows from and into our worshipping life. I don't know if they were reading through Revelation as a group, and I suspect they weren't let's be honest. But they were on to something. Their instinct grew from a spiritual anthropology: we are made to worship God. Everything else flows from that purpose and priority. But really no one was appealing to something as heady as spiritual anthropology. What they said was: I'm tired. I'm tired of church being an experience that wrings me out; my soul needs a place to worship wholeheartedly and help me return to a life rooted in God when so much else in my life is tearing me apart. Sacred and simple someone said. That sounds sacred and simple. And it stuck.

We need a place and need a community where we are renewed in the sacred. A place and a community where things that matter the most matter the most: where tears are welcome and laughter and questions and mystery and prayer and broken hearts and repentance and children and seekers who aren't sure if they really belong and silence just enough to be uncomfortable because we're so used to noise. And then music. It must be a place where music is still made by people for God, not just by professionals for a passive audience.

Worship in music, in silence, in Word, and Table is the beginning and the end of the church's life. And not just the beginning and end like bookends, but all in between; the alpha and omega and the beta, gamma, delta, epsilon . . . sorry I was just showing off I know my Greek alphabet. But I could run through all the letters and all the words and all the hours of our days and all the days of our weeks and every thought captive and prayers without ceasing, everything we do

individually and all God calls us to like welcoming strangers in love blessed house for them and opening our doors and making them a little wider in hospitality on our church campus and teaching our children and youth in faith and growing plants good to eat and share and repentance and forgiveness and the hope of reconciliation. And in all of this, the final word on everything is . . . worship. Our work is our prayer, and our prayer is our work.

In the vision of Revelation, worship is the song of the angels, myriads and myriads, thousands and thousands of angels singing. And it is the song of the creatures: every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea and all that is in them. All creation and every creature bend the knee of their hearts to praise God. This is the ultimate, enduring vision of worship and the purpose for all creation. This moment that never ends. Can you imagine?

Is a participation in this worship even possible in this life, even possible a church where worship is the center? Only with grace and with intention. To sustain a worshipping life, the church must stand in the witness, memory, and Spirit of Jesus Christ. Worship of God is resistance to every other pretender to God's throne. And there are lots of pretenders to God's throne to resist. Sometimes it's as obvious as the Caesar of Rome, who claimed to be divine and who wielded the power of empire. That was John's situation in the first century. So, sometimes its big canvas Caesar and Empire, but pretenders to resist can also just be our little ol' selves with our big ol' egos or our ol' questions or resentments or selfishness or distractions or our sins. Those little things become big enough to block out our vision of Christ as the center. They take center. Worship of God is resistance to everything else that competes for center. Read Revelation against this backdrop.

And when you do, hear the angel's question, "Who is worthy to open the scroll?" And hear it as a question of what or who is worthy of our worship. In the symbolic imagery, there's a scroll with 7 seals enclosing it, and no one can break the seals and open it. Yet the seals must be broken and the scroll must be rolled open. An angel searches all creation for someone worthy to open the scroll and break its seals, but no one is found who is worthy. Like Arthur's Excalibur lodged in the stone or Thor's hammer unmovable, only one who is worthy can do this. If the seals are never broken, God's plan for the defeat of evil and the full coming of God's reign will never happen. As the scene opens, no one in heaven or earth or under the earth was able to open it or look into it. John begins to weep; he is heartbroken. It's the heartache we feel, too, when we desire something good and yet find it out of our reach. When our hearts break at injustices we cannot stop, oppression we cannot fix, for the suffering of innocents we cannot solve. If only God would come. In Revelation's picture of this heartache . . . if only the seal can be broken and scroll opened, all shall be well.

I won't try to interpret what exactly a seal represents. I think we already know, in our bones. The seal is anything and everything that stands in the way of God's will for creation—for peace, for justice, for love, for redemption. And it needs to be broken open because people are suffering; creation is groaning. Everyone can see the seal must be broken, yet the seal cannot be broken. And there's the heartache.

And also a voice: “Do not weep, behold, the Lion of Judah, the Root of David has conquered. He can open the scroll and its seals.” Ah, in the darkest despair, hope has arrived! And now, in apocalyptic-style telling, or Marvel movies, the next thing we would expect to see is a conquering hero. The enemy is strong; the conqueror is stronger. Evil is mighty, but good is stronger than evil. It’s a lion, after all. The Lion of Judah to overcome the power of empire and oppression, that of Rome and that in every generation. Our violence will defeat your violence. The lion has arrived.

But then we turn our heads and look with John, and to our surprise, we see not a lion, not a mighty man of war, but a Lamb. “A lamb standing as though it had been slain.” What’s this? Not a lion, but a lamb, literally a little lamb. Not just a little lamb, but a little lamb who is dead, yet alive, killed yet living. Is this not the witness, memory, and Spirit of Jesus Christ? Salvation comes through the lamb who was slain yet still stands as the heart of creation and the heart of worship.

At the heart of worship isn’t a Caesar projecting strength and demanding obedience.
At the heart of worship isn’t an idea, not even our best ideas about God or our plans.
At the heart of worship isn’t a mirror where we see ourselves. This is not about us, looking back upon ourselves.

At the heart of worship isn’t projected human power or strength or wisdom; it is the very weakness of God and foolishness of God. Who sends a lamb, when what we need is a lion?
At the heart of worship is Jesus the Christ, a lamb led to slaughter, and yet alive and the one worthy to take the scroll, break the seal, and open the way to God’s redemption of all creation.

To keep our eye on Christ is the prayer and work of the church in all things. It is the beginning and end of worship. It is what matters. It is what matters in everything we do from the breaking of bread in Eucharist, to the breaking of our hearts for God’s people and our own redemption, to the breaking open of our lives in love for the one who is worthy of our worship and praise.

Amen.

