

The Reason to Sing

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[0 : 0 0] Well, now, we don't usually do this on Christmas Eve, but I wonder if you wouldn't mind taking out your Bible, please. We usually print out the lessons on the bulletin, but it would be too much turning around them.

So I wonder if you would turn to the last book of the Bible, to Revelation. It's on page 229. And if you have to share with someone next to you, that's fine.

We're going to look at these two chapters, which are two of the most dazzling chapters in all the Bible. And I want to just begin by saying we mustn't be scared away from Revelation by the symbols and the loud sounds and the colorful sights.

Because the book of Revelation isn't like a mathematical puzzle that we have to solve by our clever thinking. It's more like an interactive art gallery where you go in and you see gradually a picture of yourself and your own life and your future and a picture of God and what he's doing.

The amazing thing about these chapters is that God allows us up into his mind to see things from his perspective. So when we come to this book of Revelation, we don't need a spiritual calculator.

[1 : 2 8] What we need are humble hearts, an open imagination and a love of the truth. And what we find is that things are just not as they seem.

In chapter 3, before we get to our section tonight, we meet a church that thinks it's wealthy, fashionable, well-fed and needing nothing.

I say this to you, it's got nothing to do with you here at St. John's. But Jesus then turns and says, you are poor, pitiable, blind and naked.

Which is more than a little disconcerting, I'm sure you'll agree. And that makes the opening of chapter 4 very, very important. And I want to read the first verse just to hold that in our hearts.

John, who is writing this, says, After that I looked, and behold, a low look in heaven, an open door.

[2 : 2 9] And the first voice that I heard speaking to me like a trumpet said, Come up hither, and I will show you what must take place after this.

In these two chapters, 4 and 5, a door is open in heaven, and it remains open. And we have the remarkable privilege of being allowed to look into heaven.

All the early Christmas narratives that come from the eyewitnesses, they are filled with fragments of what is happening in heaven.

Again and again, the angels burst through to Mary and to the shepherds and to Joseph. And the angels can't help announcing this good news of Christ's birth and when the shepherds hear from the angel suddenly a choir of angels cannot restrain themselves and they burst into song, glory to God in the highest and peace to those with whom God is pleased.

It is as though on that first Christmas night, the veil between earth and heaven is very thin and the angels keep peeking through.

[3 : 47] But what happens here in Revelation 4 is that because Jesus Christ has come for us, it's not just that heaven peeks through, now the door of heaven is opened and remains open.

And it means the stories of our lives are written on a much bigger canvas than we can possibly imagine. And that's what's happening in your life and what's happening in my life and what's happening in the world in which we live has to do with what's going on in heaven.

Difficult to grasp this, difficult to grasp the privilege of seeing this, I think. It simply means to us that this world in which we live is not all that there is.

The world in which we shop is not the only reality. There is a door open on a whole new reality, a reality that's much more important than ours.

And that means that the course of this world and the course of our lives, in the end, are not dictated by stock prices or by the marketplace or even by our genetic code, but they are dictated by what is taking place in heaven.

[5 : 03] We live in this world and we are flooded with information and we are flooded with facts and we are just, we're just not able to make sense of them and generally we just feel overwhelmed. But here in these words, we are invited up into heaven to see what must take place.

And it must take place because here is the centre and the heart of life and existence. And what is the first thing that we see when we are allowed into the door of heaven?

Verse 2. Let me read a couple more verses.

He who sat appeared like Jasper and Carnelian. Round the throne a rainbow looked like emerald. And round the throne were 24 thrones and seated on the throne's 24 elders clad in white garments with golden crowns on their heads.

And from the throne issued flashes of lightning and voices and peals of thunder. And before the throne burnt seven torches of fire, which are the seven spirits of God. And before the throne there is, as it were, a sea of glass like crystal.

[6 : 22] Now, if you can just work through all the splendour and look at the centre, there's a throne. It's the symbol of power and authority and majesty and control.

And what we are seeing in heaven is that there is a throne which is above every throne and that all power and all might and all control in the universe surrenders to this throne.

It's a symbol of God himself. And every word I just read very quickly stretches our imagination with colour and beauty and loveliness.

And the radiance of God fills the place because all reality has to be seen in relation to the throne. Even the stones shine with a kind of a rainbow, a reminder of God's promise to Noah that he would never flood the world again.

He's bound himself to creation. And the rainbow shines to demonstrate that it's not just power, this throne. The throne is also the throne of mercy.

[7 : 38] And that the exercise of authority is the exercise of love. So here, I just want to step back. Here we see at the centre of heaven, at the centre of all things, at the centre of life, is God himself who gathers his people around himself.

And the world in which we live is not all there is. And the issues that we spend so much time worrying about, there is a more important reality.

And I think that's why this chapter ends in praise. You see the last verse, verse 11. There is a burst of praise. Worthy art thou, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honour and power.

For thou didst create all things, and by thy will they existed and were created. Everything that exists, from the smallest subatomic particle to the biggest galaxies in space, they are made by him.

And they are under his control. He has made them by his word. We exist by his will. We continue to exist by his will. And what the praise is saying is that everything that exists, exists for a reason, for a purpose.

[9 : 02] By thy will they existed. We are not accidental life forms. We are made for a reason. We depend on him. And I think that's why the choir starts by singing, worthy, worthy, worthy. Because creation itself is an act of grace and kindness. And every joy that we experience bears testimony to the God who is the source of joy.

And I wonder, you know, we live in Vancouver, one of the most beautiful places in the world. I wonder if you've ever stopped and said, thank you to God for the fact that you live and the fact of the beauty of the place in which we live.

Have you ever stopped and wondered why God has made this place or why God has made you? What is his purpose? And that takes us into chapter 5. Let me read the first couple of verses of chapter 5.

What is God's purpose? I saw in the right hand of him who was seated on the throne a scroll written within and on the back, sealed with seven seals.

[10 : 14] And I saw a strong angel proclaiming with a loud voice, who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals? And no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or to look into it.

And I wept much that no one was found worthy to open the scroll or to look into it. Here in the hand of God who sits on the throne is a little scroll.

And in it is written the future of the world, the account of the destiny of every living being. But it's sealed closed. And this big angel throws out a challenge to all creation to find someone who is worthy to undo this scroll and unravel the seals.

But there is not one single creature who is worthy and there is weeping in heaven. It's very interesting if you think about this.

The angel does not ask, is there anyone powerful enough? He says, is there anyone worthy? There is no human who can open the scroll.

[11 : 27] We cannot decide the destiny of others. We cannot decide even our own destiny. We are not the captains of our souls. We are profoundly, in this sense, profoundly unworthy.

None of us are competent to stand judgment on each other. and the angel searches through all creation and there is no angel, there is no saint, there is no prophet, there is no person.

All the secrets of God are beyond us. But in verse 5 there is change. In verse 5 we read, one of the elders said to me, do not weep.

Look, the lion of the tribe of Judah, the root of David, has conquered. He can open the scroll with its seven seals. Here is a character, a terrifying character, the lion of the tribe of Judah, who has conquered decisively.

Surely he is worthy. But when the apostle turns to see this lion, what does he see? Verse 6, between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders, I saw a lamb, standing as though it had been slain.

[12 : 37] Seven horns, seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent into all the earth. And he went and took the scroll from the right hand of him who was seated on the throne. When John turns to look at the lion, what he sees is a lamb.

And not just a lamb, but a lamb that has been slain. Friends, here is the central paradox of the Christian faith. It is the combination of the weakness of God with the power of God.

It's a combination of the rule of God and the love and the vulnerability of God. It's the combination of the truth of God and the grace of God.

And that is nowhere more beautifully combined than in the person of Jesus Christ. And what we celebrate tonight is that the Son of God entered our world and chose our vulnerability, the vulnerability of our humanity.

The eternal becomes temporal. The infinite becomes finite. The word which created all flesh makes his glory subject to human weakness and human humiliation.

[13 : 53] The deity subjects himself to the limits of our life. The Lord of life chooses to take our human life to die. And one of the things that drives home this fact in an astonishing fashion is that it's not just a lamb, but it's a lamb which is slain, literally slaughtered.

And the lamb is the one who remains slaughtered forever. He was dead, but is now alive. This is what Dorothy Sayers says.

She says, this is the outline of the official story, the tale of the time when God was the underdog and got beaten, when he submitted to the conditions that he had laid down and became a man like other men he had made.

And the men that he made killed him. She says, this is the dogma that we find so dull, this terrifying drama of which God is the victim and the hero.

I think it's just amazing to us really. There's nothing in fiction like it. And the text draws our attention to the fact that the lamb is not just standing somewhere in heaven.

[15 : 10] Literally it reads, in the middle of the throne the lamb stands. At the centre of the centre. Which means that Jesus Christ is the centre of all history.

He is the centre of our lives. He is the centre of creation. And so a chorus rises again in verse 9. The living creatures give glory and honour and thanks.

Verse 10. The 24 elders fall down. And in verse, I'm sorry, verse 9 of chapter 5, they sing a new song saying, Worthy art thou to take the scroll and to open its seals.

for thou wast slain and by thy blood didst ransom men for God from every tribe and tongue and every people and nation and hast made them a kingdom of priests to our God and they shall reign upon the earth.

This is a new song because the lamb has created a new situation. He is the only one through all creation who is worthy to carry out the plans of God because by his death he has ransomed us to God.

[16 : 25] And this ransom word is a slavery word. It describes the rescue of a slave who has been taken captive and the price that's been paid. It might be a battle in which many lives are lost or it might be the simple exchange of money.

It depends how important and how precious the slave is. And it gives some indication of how precious you and I are to God that he would give the life of his own son to rescue us from slavery.

No wonder the angels break forth and sing joy to the world. The Bible explains that we are slaves because we do not live with Jesus Christ at the centre of our lives at the centre of our thoughts and at the centre of our affections.

And what we do is we put other things at the centre and anything other than Christ that we put at the centre we become enslaved to. It doesn't matter how good the thing is in itself.

Whatever we put in the centre if it's not God it does not have the power to sustain us. It does not have the power to give us life. It is not worthy to be lived for.

[17 : 46] So without Christ at the centre we become slaves to our strongest desire or to the latest advertising whatever. And one of the infallible symptoms of our slavery is a growing restlessness and an anxiety and a boredom.

We were made for God we were made by God and God alone can sustain us and God alone can give us life. God alone is sufficient for us to build ourselves on.

God alone is worthy of our worship and our devotion. And so millions of voices join together in great joy affirming Christ as the centre in verse 12 saying with a loud voice worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honour and glory and blessing.

And then every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth joins in verse 13 and says to him who sits upon the Lamb sorry to him who sits upon the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honour and glory and might forever and ever.

And I think the most remarkable thing about these two chapters is that chapter 4 finishes in praise to the Creator worthy and chapter 5 finishes in praise to the Creator and to the Lamb.

[19 : 16] In other words the praise and honour and the glory that is due to God is also due to Jesus Christ as well. Christian worship is not just worship of God the Father it's worship of God the Father through Jesus Christ the Son.

Jesus is at the centre of the throne the Lion and the Lamb who was slain the only one worthy to take the scroll the only one worthy for us to place our affections upon and I don't think there's no one who's better qualified to rule there's no one who's better qualified to understand our messy lives and this messy world than the one who gave his life for the world he has become human for us he has given his life as a ransom and I think there's only one true centre that will bear our worship tonight he is in heaven he is in the midst of the throne and we need to set our lives in relation to him and the only true response for us there are a number but I think the keyest and truest response is simply worship and worship of course is not something that you have to work up in yourself you can't manufacture worship you can't manipulate yourself into worship it just comes from a deep sense of the worthiness of God and of his son it comes from the conviction that we're in the presence of God the God who creates the God who rules the God who reveals the God who redeems and it looks at our lives and it looks at our world and it sees the chaos and it sees all the conflict and it sees it all in relation to the lamb and to the one who sits upon the throne it's why

God's people always sing it's a reflection of what's happening in heaven and even though we sing badly and you particularly badly and even though our words are inadequate to describe the wonder of what God has done for us we still sing because everything he has done has to do with our good and everything he has done reveals how precious we are and everything he has done leads us to say worthy worthy and to him who sits upon the throne and to the lamb be blessing and honour and glory and might forever and ever and all God's people say Amen Amen amen you amen you