

November 22

Lesson 12

Worship at the Throne

Focal Passage: Revelation 4:1-11

Background Text: Revelation 4:1-5:14

Purpose Statement: To anticipate in worship the full presence of God awaiting us in the resurrection

Revelation 4:1-11

¹After this I looked and there was a door that had been opened in heaven. The first voice that I had heard, which sounded like a trumpet, said to me, "Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this." ²At once I was in a Spirit-inspired trance and I saw a throne in heaven, and someone was seated on the throne. ³The one seated there looked like jasper and carnelian, and surrounding the throne was a rainbow that looked like an emerald. ⁴Twenty-four thrones, with twenty-four elders seated upon them, surrounded the throne. The elders were dressed in white clothing and had gold crowns on their heads. ⁵From the throne came lightning, voices, and thunder. In front of the throne were seven flaming torches, which are the seven spirits of God. ⁶Something like a glass sea, like crystal, was in front of the throne.

In the center, by the throne, were four living creatures encircling the throne. These creatures were covered with eyes on the front and on the back. ⁷The first living creature was like a lion. The second living creature was like an ox. The third living creature had a face like a human being. And the fourth living creature was like an eagle in flight. ⁸Each of the four living creatures had six wings, and each was covered all around and on the inside with eyes. They never rest day or night, but keep on saying,

"Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is coming."

⁹Whenever the living creatures give glory, honor, and thanks to the one seated on the

throne, who lives forever and always, ¹⁰the twenty-four elders fall before the one seated on the throne. They worship the one who lives forever and always. They throw down their crowns before the throne and say, ¹¹"You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, because you created all things. It is by your will that they existed and were created."

Key Verse: "You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, because you created all things. It is by your will that they existed and were created" (Revelation 4:11).

For obvious reasons, I will omit the name and the relationship I have with my conversation partner, although I suspect he would not mind being "outed" as an atheist.

A few months ago, I had a good talk with a person close whom I have known for over 40 years. He has read the Bible through many times but does not believe in God. We began talking about books by famous atheists that have come out in the last 20 years or so. Some of the more aggressive atheists believe not only that God doesn't exist, but also that religion causes much harm, fomenting war, hatred, and conflict. He chided me about the problems of the church and said he would never be a believer.

I listened to his side and then said that, for me, if I didn't believe in God and in the resurrection, I would find myself in despair. I did not claim the resurrection so much for myself as for others. Without the resurrection, we would have no hope for the children killed in mass shootings. The truth would never come out in the midst of all of the lies that fly around. Those who perpetrate great evil would never face justice.

He responded that he couldn't do anything about it, so he didn't feel despair. Even realizing that I will have to face God's justice, I still find assurance that God will make things right in the resurrection.

The Vision

I hope you have your safety harness, your signal flares, and your emergency radio. We are now in the dangerous territory of the New Testament. In the Book of Revelation, especially the part past the first three chapters, we enter a mysterious world. Misunderstanding the Book of Revelation has led to spiritual sickness, bizarre cults, political missteps, and environmental carelessness.

Although an early theory assumed that the author of the Gospel of John also wrote Revelation, that idea has since faded away. Bible scholars now refer to the author as John of Patmos. He was not born in Patmos. That was his place of exile, but we know nothing else about him.

He was not the apostle John, but lived many years after the apostle. He wrote in a time of general persecution of the church. He wrote his book in the form of apocalypse, recounting a vision of the end times and the new heaven and new earth. We cannot analyze any of the actual visions of John of Patmos, but we can look at his literary allusions and the connections with the Old Testament he made. He wrote a powerful word of hope that proclaims the power of God that one can see fully only in a vision.

What ideas and images come into your mind when you think about the Book of Revelation?

The Prophets

When reading Revelation 4, we might readily think of Isaiah 6, where the prophet reports having seen a vision of God on a throne in a heavenly temple. Isaiah reported his vision during a political and social crisis in the life of the people of Judah created by Uzziah's death.

Isaiah described a powerful, majestic vision of God that strikes us as somewhat eerie. Flying serpents surrounded the deity. The doorframe of the Temple shook. Smoke filled the house. Isaiah's vision assured the people that a powerful deity still ruled in heaven, even if things seemed uncertain on earth.

Ezekiel 1 also provides a background passage. Ezekiel reported that the heavens opened so that he could see into the divine realm. Bizarre events accompanied Ezekiel's vision: storms, strange creatures, fire, and gleaming amber.

This prophet's vision also spoke to a community in crisis, as the Babylonians had defeated the people of Judah and taken them into exile. Ezekiel's strange vision report assured the people that God's power, seen most clearly in a vision, continues to matter, even in the face of utter defeat.

The vision reported by John of Patmos also contains an image of God on a throne, strange creatures, and hard-to-interpret events. John clearly wanted to invoke the message of the prophets, that the people could affirm God's power, even in the midst of oppression and persecution on earth.

How does it help you better understand what you read in Revelation to see the background in the Old Testament prophets?

The Symbolism

Although the symbolism in John's vision recorded in Revelation 4 has created much discussion among scholars, we can affirm some likely interpretations. The rainbow alludes to the Noah story in Genesis, where God placed a bow in the sky to remind God of the covenant. The 24 thrones and elders represent God's people as the 12 tribes of Israel and the 12 apostles, the forerunners of the church. The four living creatures likely represent the nonhuman beings of the animal world. Celestial beings, the people of God, and all of creation offer praise to God in the vision.

In biblical thought, the sea often represented the home of the demonic and chaos (Daniel 7; Mark 4:35-41). The sea of glass may represent God's power over the realm of the demonic and chaotic.⁴ In reading this chapter, you might also want to look at the lyrics to the hymn "Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty."

Despite the density of the symbolism in this chapter, two clear messages come through. First, the reality that the people see around them is not the only reality or the most important reality. The reality of what's going on in the heavenly realm is more important and can be discerned only in a vision. Regular human senses do not disclose all of what is real. Second, the vision proclaims the power of God in the midst of the abuse of power by human government.

A third affirmation from the passage comes from the prevalence of worship in John's vision. The 24 elders and the creatures all offer words and gestures of worship to the one seated on the throne. Worship honors God, unites God's people and all creation, and recognizes God's sovereignty.

What interpretations of the Book of Revelation have you encountered? How does it help you in reading the Book of Revelation to understand the central message about God's power that we cannot see? In what situations have you needed a reminder of God's power, even if you couldn't see it directly?

The Afterlife

The Purpose Statement for this lesson points to our anticipation of the resurrection in worship. The explicit mention of the resurrection of people comes in Revelation 7:9-17. Nevertheless, this heavenly vision affirms the resurrection. When we worship now, we can experience God's presence in several ways. In the music, the sermon, the sacrament, and the fellowship, we can discover God's presence. God is present, even if we do not feel it.

Throughout most of the Old Testament, the writers and readers did not assume much of an

afterlife. The Old Testament uses the term *Sheol* to describe the abode of the dead. From what we can discern about Sheol, it was not a place anyone looked forward to going. Psalm 88 describes Sheol as a dark, dreary place, where people are unable to offer praise to God.

The only place in the Old Testament that clearly affirms resurrection comes in Daniel 12:2, written during the persecution of the Judeans by Antiochus IV. Belief in resurrection actually arose as a way of vindicating God, because the faithful were being killed, while those who denied their faith prospered. Resurrection affirmed that God was more powerful than Antiochus.

In the Jewish literature written between the Old Testament and the New Testament, one sees the clear affirmation of resurrection. In the Book of 2 Maccabees, a family endures martyrdom at the hands of Antiochus, because they believe in the resurrection.

Belief in the resurrection forms the bedrock of the New Testament. Paul goes so far as to say that everything about the preaching and teaching of the church is useless without the resurrection of Jesus. If Christ has not been raised, Christians deserve pity (1 Corinthians 15:12-19). In the final resurrection, we will experience God's presence fully.

Why is belief in the resurrection important to you?

Worship and Waiting

Paul made a powerful statement in Romans 8:18: "I believe that the present suffering is nothing compared to the coming glory that awaits us." Paul did not necessarily say that our lives will become better now. He did not promise that Christians could bring justice and rightness to this world. With God's strength, we do what we can to ease our pain and to correct what is unjust in our world. Paul put our hope in the "coming glory." Paul's statement comes to us as good news but also frustrating news.

We hear Paul's statement as good news when we remember that in the resurrection, we will find healing, joy, redemption of our sin, the full presence of God, and fellowship with one another. As Paul went on to say, God will free the whole creation from its bondage. The resurrection concerns not just us as individuals, but all of creation.

Revelation says something similar at the end of the book when John wrote, "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the former heaven and the former earth had passed away, and the sea was no more" (Revelation 21:1). All that is wrong, destructive, oppressive, and evil about creation will be overcome in God's new heaven and new earth. In that we rejoice. For that promise, we worship.

Paul's words frustrate us because we wonder why we have to wait. Why can we not experience

healing now? Why can't the injustices of the world stop now? Why can the truth not come out now? We find the wait for this new creation agonizing.

The survivors of great injustice find the wait more agonizing than do those who have relative comfort in this life. Those with health, money, success, and power may still feel frustration at the evil of the world, but the great survivors of injustice--poverty, displacement, racism, sexism, and other demonic forces--find the wait intolerable. Those with relative comfort often do not seek to help those who survive great injustice because they assume God will take care of them in the resurrection.

Revelation was originally written for people who had survived great injustice and persecution. John's word to them in this passage is an affirmation of God's power, revealed in his heavenly vision. Much of the rest of the Book of Revelation describes great battles, cosmic conflict, gruesome creatures, and large-scale deception. Much of this symbolism makes the statement that the evil in creation has power and cannot be defeated easily. Only God, working on the cosmic level, can defeat the power of evil.

In the vision we read in Revelation 4, John shows the reality of God and creation's worship of God. The description of resurrection of people in Chapter 7 affirms that God will bring those of "every nation, tribe, people, and language" together in the resurrection (7:9).

For now, Paul and John would exhort us to show patience. We show an active patience that ministers to those in need, stands up to oppression, worships even in the face of despair, and lives life courageously and compassionately. Worship draws us to this vision of resurrection and gives us the resources to endure and overcome while we wait for God's promise.

John himself endured exile to Patmos, so he did not write from a position of comfort. He found resources in the prophets and in his faith in Christ to embrace hope.

How do you experience frustration in waiting for the resurrection? In what ways does the promise of resurrection give you hope when life discourages you? In what ways does the Holy Spirit enable you to keep going when your resources feel depleted? In what ways do you wait actively?

We thank you, O God, for John's vision, as strange to us as it is. Help us to read such bizarre words faithfully and carefully. We thank you for the hope of resurrection. Grant us the patience to endure, while we work to bring justice to others; in the name of Jesus. Amen.

From *Revelation*, by Justo L. Gonzalez and Catherine Gunsalus Gonzalez (Westminster John Knox Press, 1997); pages