

December 31, 2023

“Holy is the Song”

Revelation 4:6b-11

Intro:

On New Year’s Eve, most people take a moment to look back and reflect upon the year that was – the ups, the downs, the moments they are proud of and those they wish they could do over again. They look at the accomplishments at work, the successes in sports, and the times spent with family and friends. This is all done not to dwell in the past, but to help put perspective on goals and hopes and dreams for the year to come. And, yes, with those hopes and dreams come the inevitable New Year’s resolutions that so many of us make and then struggle to follow through with. I don’t think we fail in those plans because they are not important, but maybe because they are not necessarily the most important things we could or should be doing. Perhaps part of our lack of success is because deep down, and maybe even unknown to us, we are made for something different.

This morning, I want to take a moment to shed a little light on what that “something else” could, or should, be.

The Text:

In the book of Revelation, we are given, among other things, a wonderful and fantastically cryptic and difficult to understand glimpse into the heavenly realm. John is given a vision that defies human comprehension, and yet he is instructed as part of this vision to write it down using human language and imagery that most likely fails to adequately explain all that he sees and experiences. For him, this vision is fully immersive and as real as anything can be.

This vision is not the first time that God opens wide the curtain that veils humanity from seeing what the Kingdom of God looks like. And when God does this, it leaves an impression upon the visitor that does not go away. It fills them with such an inexpressible awe, that they can do nothing except watch events

unfold with a feeling of utter insignificance, fully aware of their own sinful failure in light of a perfect and holy worship.

Look with me for a moment at Isaiah's experience in Isaiah 6. Isaiah is given a vision of the heavenly throne room – again, what we read is the effort of a finite human being trying to put into limited language his experience of witnessing the glory of Heaven. What he sees there is only the glory of God and that His presence fills everything and is in everything and over everything. But we need to have spatial context, so Isaiah sees and describes a throne with God sitting upon it. And around that throne are creatures – angelic beings, whose sole purpose for existing is to worship God. They are fantastic creatures, but Isaiah tries to capture the awe of them.

“Holy, holy, holy!” is the praise they sing out. In their song, their chant, they identify that God's glory is everywhere, and He alone is worthy to be praised.

Isaiah's response, a little further on, is to despair for he knows he is far from being holy himself and he has just been witness to Him who is perfectly Holy – as the angels have proclaimed.

But we aren't talking about Isaiah's vision today; we are talking about John's vision found in Revelation 4. John has a similar experience to Isaiah's. He is transported through the Spirit to the heavenly realms, and the only way he can make sense of the overwhelming presence of God's glory is to frame it in the image of a throne room. So, even though God is not limited to one place in space and time, John needed to use a more static image so that his readers would be able to grasp and follow what he would be writing later.

In this throne room is the one who sits on the throne, He who is beyond description, but John tries to put into words the majesty of what he sees – comparisons to precious gems and refracted light radiating all around him is the best he can do. John's vision has more detail in it than Isaiah's does, but this does not mean they contradict one another. This is because there is a different

purpose for each vision, or more specifically, for each of the people receiving it. John is given this vision so that the church to come will be able to understand what will happen as God's redemptive plan continues to unfold. Sin and death and Satan have been defeated through the work of Jesus on the cross, but there is still a drama (if you will) that needs to play out before the fullness of that victory is realized on earth as it is in heaven. John's vision is given so that those who come to faith after Jesus' ascension will not lose hope when human time does not line up with divine time.

So, John is given a longer and larger vision. In John's vision there is a throne room, with God seated on the throne in the room. There are also angelic beings of fantastical description whose purpose is to worship. And not just to worship, but to lead in worship. For in the expanded vision of John, there are also 24 elders seated on thrones of their own arrayed before the Throne of God.

There is debate as to who those 24 elders are, or who they represent, but that is not a topic I want to get into in this message. It is "what" those 24 elders are doing and not specifically "who" they are that I want to draw your attention to this morning.

Holy Worship:

The "what" is worship. Worship is what is central in this part of the vision, and worship is the acknowledgment of who God is. The angels who lead the worship in the scene provide that direction for the elders, and for us who are participating in what is happening through what John has written and passed down.

Holy, Holy, Holy. Again, as in Isaiah, this is the heart of the worship expression. We acknowledge that God is Holy. He is to be worshipped not because He does things for us, not because He brings miracles into our lives, not because He orders creation and has set it up in such a way that life can thrive, not even because we as humans bear His image. He is to be worshipped because He is holy and He is the only one who is Holy and worthy of such praise. There is nothing more that the angels can say, no higher praise that can be offered, and so the song of

holiness is one that is sung forever. It is a ceaseless refrain that does not lose any of its majesty or impact in the river of time. God is the one who was, who is, and who is to come.

If worship, unceasing expression of the holiness of God, is at the center of this vision, and it is a vision that has been given so that we can better understand where and how we fit into what God is doing in this world, then I think it is safe for us to see ourselves in the place of those 24 elders.

I don't think it is all that much of a stretch, even, for many of us to think of ourselves as being worthy of having crowns. Humans bear God's image. We are the pinnacle, as it were, of creation. It is people that God created to know Him and enjoy relationship with him. The actions of the elders help us to know what to do with this understanding of our own importance to God. When the angels pronounce the holiness of God, the elders fall down in worship, removing their crowns and placing them before the throne. And they proclaim the worthiness of God to receive praise and glory and honor. They do this not because what they offer is so important, but the one whom it is offered to is.

Conclusion:

We need to place ourselves into this vision. We need to take up the position of one of those 24 elders. We need to feel the weight of the crown on our own heads. This is a crown that speaks of glory. It is a crown that speaks of importance – and to be sure we are important to God. We are so important, and His love for us is so great, that He sent His own Son Jesus to stand in our place of punishment for our sins. We need to know these things.

And we need to realize that worship is not about us or *our* glory or *our* importance. Worship is about submission. Worship is about taking the crown of importance off of our heads and laying it at the feet of Him who sits on that ultimate throne.

This is the encouragement and challenge for us as we head into the new year. This is the resolution that we can keep, for it is part of what we have been made for. We were made to bring God glory through knowing Him and through worship of Him. So often, I think, we come to church or other events of worship with an expectation that we should get something out of it – being emotionally moved or touched by the songs, or encouraged (or maybe even challenged) by the sermon, or perhaps for some, to receive of our weekly dose of Scripture through the readings on that Sunday. And if our needs are not met, then we leave feeling like someone has not delivered on what they were supposed to, eventually causing us to search for another church to provide what we think we should be receiving.

But worship is not about us. When we come to worship, we come to submit ourselves to God, to lay the crowns of our own glory before Him, and to acknowledge His holiness. What God chooses to do with that worship is entirely up to Him, but I can promise you it will be glorious if we are in a position to receive.

So, this year, let me challenge us to a new and deeper worship, one that joins in with the angelic beings in proclaiming “Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God, the Almighty.”

Let’s pray.