

May 5, 2024

“Before the Throne”

Isaiah 6:1-7

Revelation 4, 5, 20:11-15

Intro:

What will it be like to stand before the throne of God?

Clearly this is not a question that can be easily or experientially answered as none of us have done so yet.

But even so, I would hazard a guess that many of us have at some point wondered and maybe even imagined what it would be like. Perhaps not at the very throne, but wondered around what Heaven would be like. Scripture has several moments of pulling the curtain back, just a little bit, to give us a glimpse. I think this small glimpse is intended to spark our imagination and to build within us a desire to fully experience the glory that is teasingly described. Songs, poetry, stories, and even jokes have been written with heaven at their center.

So, this morning we are going to spend our time imagining what it would be like to stand before the throne. There will be no challenge or call to better living this morning – no three points on how to live out the truth of the Scripture passage, just an invitation to engage your imagination and to wonder. And in the end, hopefully, find a reassurance that deepens your faith.

Let's grab hold of our sanctified imaginations and begin...

Biblical Images:

As I said, there are several places in the Bible where a glimpse of heaven is given to a human being. The first chapter of the book of Ezekiel is a description of what he saw when “the heavens were opened” and he “saw visions of God.” (Ezekiel 1:1). The book of Daniel is full of different visions, and many of those involve images of heaven as future events are unfolded before him. But my favourite Old

Testament throne-of-God vision is the one in Isaiah, which we read just a few moments ago.

Here is poor Isaiah, getting a divine image that is utterly terrifying for him, although it is not terrifying in the way that I would have supposed. Isaiah describes a great throne with God sitting upon it, and his robe was so large that it filled the heavenly temple Isaiah has found himself in. Flying around the throne are fantastical heavenly beings, Seraphim, each having 6 wings that serve different purposes, and each Seraphim is loudly proclaiming to the others, “Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of Heaven’s Armies” (Holy is God). One might be safe in assuming that it was those creatures that terrified Isaiah. But Isaiah is built differently than most of us. For him, the terrifying thing is that he, an unholy person, has seen the perfectly holy God. He expects to be utterly destroyed. But one of the Seraphim swoops down with a burning coal, and through the act of touching Isaiah’s lips, grants him a temporary holiness so that he can remain in the vision and in the presence of God. The passage continues on with a call for someone to take on the task of evangelism, which Isaiah answers, and which is used in churches and Bible studies all over the place to mobilize believers into outreach programs. But that is not the focus here.

If we jump forward into the New Testament, there are a few mentions of what heaven will be like. For instance, Jesus talks about a house with many rooms in it. This tells us that not only will there be enough room in heaven for everyone who follows Jesus, but Jesus will also personalize heaven to individuals (“I will go and prepare a room for you”). The bulk of the heavenly imagery in the New Testament is given to John while he is in exile on the island of Patmos, and is recorded for us in the book of Revelation.

This is not an in-depth study on the book of Revelation; however, it is worth noting that the book is full of descriptions of what John saw through the Spirit, and much of it does not make straight and clear sense – nor is it supposed to! We are meant to seek the message and meaning throughout our Christian life, but I will say this. Much of what we read in Revelation (and the other Apocalyptic

Scriptures) are a reflection of human writers trying to give shape to the indescribable wonders that they have witnessed, using mundane human words and language that falls short of being truly able to convey the full thought.

What Revelation does do, is bring us to focus on the throne of God in heaven, and not get distracted by any of the other sights that might be seen. God is the central figure, and should rightly be the center of attention. Chapter 4 introduces us to what worship in heaven is like, and chapter 5 has the first real interaction with the throne itself – but we will come back to that.

If we skip ahead to the end, we find another vision of the throne room in chapter 20, which we have already read this morning. In this image, there is still the throne, but there are also books laid out before the throne. And all the peoples of the world that have ever been and will ever be, are standing before the throne and are judged based on the deeds of their lives as recorded in those books. And there is also the Book of Life. John explains that anyone whose name is not written in the Book of Life will be thrown into the Lake of Fire, which is the second death. From there the vision moves to the New Heaven and New Earth that will come in the end.

What Do We See?

Everything in Revelation is what John saw. What is it that we will see? This is where we can open our imaginations up. Some of you might already be thinking of streets paved with gold, and pearly gates with St. Peter standing behind a lectern, taking attendance. Some of you might be picturing houses and mansions where everyone will live in grand luxury (or what we perceive luxury to be in our present state; such things likely won't be important for us when we reach heaven). You might be picturing angelic choirs. You might imagine who you will see and recognize there. I do believe there will be recognition, even though we will receive new, resurrection bodies.

But now, focus your imagination and allow it to linger in the throne room. Taking what we have read about it, what do you see? What feelings are you

experiencing? Very likely you will see angelic beings with multiple sets of wings, or covered with eyes, or some other fantastic form, flying around and singing and shouting.

You will also see the throne. And you will see the books laid out. And you will see that your name is there. And beside your name you will see the detailed account of your life – all your deeds, good and bad. And this is where it might get scary. The list of good and bad might not balance out well. Even though you are sure you have lived a good life and behaved well, the “good” side of the list might be awfully short compared to the “bad” side. Maybe as you stand there in the vision of your imagination, you find yourself, like Isaiah, crying out “woe is me!” because you have unclean lips and you live among people with unclean lips. Meaning, we aren’t worthy, and we live among people who are not worthy.

All we see before the throne is the judgement of those books. It is a terrifying vision. It is a discouraging vision. It is a vision that should make us want to cry.

But don’t despair! If we look back to chapter 5, there is a scroll. And on that scroll are seven seals. And the question is asked, “Who is worthy to open these seals?” And no one is found to be worthy.

No one, that is, until the Lion of Judah – the Messiah, Jesus – steps forward before that throne and takes the scroll.

That is the image. And as we have turned our imaginations to heaven this morning, beginning with the question of “what will it be like to stand before the throne of God?”, and taking in all that has been said in Scripture about it, we have stood there. And before the throne are the books. And God’s judgement and our doom are laid out before us, for how can we stand in the presence of the Holy God?

But now, stepping into that gap between us and the throne and pointing to the Book of Life, is Jesus - the Lion of Judah, the Lamb of God. In place of Isaiah’s

“woe is me” and temporary burning coal, is the permanent presence of Jesus, protecting us from the wrath of judgement because He has taken it upon himself. The books that record the deeds of our lives are pushed aside and the Book of Life is opened up. And as it is opened, Jesus points to where he has written your name, not in pencil or gel pen or even permanent marker, but in ink made of his own blood. And in bold letters next to it, the words “paid in full”.

Isn't that a wonderful heavenly image for us to hold in our hearts and in our minds?

Let's pray.