

Last week Pastor Trevor did a wonderful job explaining our new sermon series in the Book of Revelation: The End is the Beginning- approaching Revelation is a new way. As Pastor Trevor said, many of us don't have positive associations with this last book in the Bible. I remember when I was a campus pastor at Vanderbilt, I offered a Bible Study on Revelation- only about 10 brave souls expressed interest. Every week we went to a different location around Nashville, including the library, the Country Music Hall of Fame, Burlington Coat Factory, the Ryman, Burger King, Robert's Western World, and the State House. At these places, we read aloud from Revelation. It was weird and wild, yet it wasn't as intimidating to read Revelation in these places of culture. Most of the students had never read it before, let alone out loud in a group. Some commented how it sounded like something at Comicon or the movie *Armageddon* or *The Walking Dead*, as "the images leap off the page: glassy seas and bowls of wrath. Horseman, dragons, and plagues, oh my" (*The End Is The Beginning*, Matthew Ian Fleming)! Others just thought of the rapture and of Kirk Cameron's *The Left Behind* series and failed predictions and scare tactics for the end of the world, which they further emphasized are plain crazy because there are no blueprints or manuals for the end of the world. However, there was one student, who took her assignment very seriously to study the text, and she experienced hope and even felt closer to God through it all. My hope is that as weird as this book can be, we might encounter the risen Lord here. Come, Lord Jesus, come! As hard as it is for us to wrap our 21st century encultured brains around these words and strange images, "the ancients for whom the author, John of Patmos, wrote Revelation would have heard resonances all over this book. They would have understood the many references from Hebrew Scripture, including the prophets. John is exiled on an

island called Patmos for confessing Jesus as Lord. He is separated from his community and so he writes letters to seven churches scattered across Asia- in modern-day Turkey. Much like other letters in the Bible, Revelation, is written to these seven specific communities of faith with pointed concerns, many of which we simply cannot know. What we do know is that John is a political prisoner, exiled by the Roman authorities. We also can surmise from John's letters that he has great concern with misdirected worship that was taking place in each community. "Idolatry, for John, involved participating in any activities focused on honoring imperial rulers or local deities. Opportunities for idolatry were frequent in the cities John addressed. Remember every book of the Bible was written in a specific context, which is why it is absolutely imperative that we know the context. How we read this strange book has vital importance for our faith. "Revelation is not a code to be unlocked. It won't reveal predictions to crack the stock market. It won't help you make sense of strange happenstances in history. It won't reveal the moment or year or day when Jesus will come back (I see you 2000). However, the people back then did believe Jesus was coming back real soon. Revelation is an unveiling, a revealing of Jesus Christ. The prophetic call of Revelation reaches back to the calls for justice from the Hebrew prophets and draws a line in the sand, insisting that the followers of Jesus remember their call in the world and maintain their unique identity" (Fleming)- living in an Upside-Down kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. "Prophetic books cast an alternative imagination for what is possible." A colleague tells of a professor he had who once said, "There are two ways to inspire change- a burning platform or a glorious vision" (Fleming). Revelation is a startling vision of the world as it is, yet it summons its readers to manifest their loyalty to God, the Creator, the Lamb, and

the Holy Spirit in a life of worship. “The promise lurking under Revelation is this: God persists. God’s love persists through all that the world could muster for these ancient Christians. And God’s love will persist in our seasons of pandemic, discord, wars and rumors of wars, economic disparity, political polarization, and more” (Fleming). For John the clear message is about allegiance. John wants these churches to believe that even though their struggles aren’t over yet, God has the last and final word and as such worship belongs to God alone. Revelation is an ecstatic vision or visions that the author, John of Patmos, describes in the pages that follow. While we don’t know a lot, “John is clearly an active part of the vision, responding with emotions that range as far as the visions- fear, sadness, joy, longing and anger” (Fleming). Today we pick up in parts of Chapters 4 and 5. A section that we won’t read today occurs at the beginning of Chapter 5. John first sees a scroll with seven seals, and he begins “to weep bitterly because no one was found worthy to open the scroll or to look into it” (v. 4). The elders tell him, “Do not weep. See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals” (5:5). At first these words probably provided John comfort. I imagine he heard what we would hear- a lion- a mighty warrior who is fierce and courageous is coming to slay and conquer God’s enemies. But then John sees something different from a lion on the throne; he sees a Lamb standing there as if it had been slaughtered. This is a striking image, to say the least: a slain lamb living and standing at the throne of God. It turns out in God’s kingdom, the one with power and authority to break open the scrolls is the weak one, the small one, the innocent victim of empire. This Lamb is Jesus Christ, our risen Lord. Talk about a reversal?! Before we listen for God’s word for us this day, let us first pray. **PRAY. READ.**

Today I'd like for us to explore a vision of Worship. Did you know that more than fifteen hymns are sung in Revelation, all giving encouragement to God's people on earth from the perspective of heaven? "No book of the Bible has had more influence on Western music and art than Revelation. Think Handel's Messiah- "Worthy Is the Lamb Who Was Slain") or Charles Wesley's many hymns. In today's text, all heaven breaks loose in singing when the lamb is found worthy to open the scroll. I love how writer and theologian, Kathleen Norris, describes the Book of Revelation: "Besides it being Emily Dickinson's favorite book of the Bible, I'm attracted to Revelation because it takes a stand in favor of singing. In fact, it proclaims that when all is said and done, of the considerable noises human beings are capable of, it is singing that will endure. A new song- if you can imagine- and light will be what remains. I find this a course of hope" (*Introduction to Revelation*). While today's passage describes the 'heavenly worship' in symbolic language, it is not easily decipherable. "In heaven 'a door stood open' (4:1), a comment reminiscent of Jewish sayings that the gates of the temple, of repentance, are always open. God is accessible. There is 'one seated on the throne' (4:2). John, like pious Jews, does not use the name of God. While John doesn't reveal much at first about what is on the throne; he tells us what is around it in such wild detail: angels, living creatures of all kinds, an immeasurable number of human beings, the elders, and the four living creatures. Also, around the throne is an emerald rainbow. The rainbow is a sign of God's covenant. Twenty-four elders wearing white robes and golden crowns surround the throne. One scholar (Bruce Metzger) suggests that these elders 'may represent the twelve patriarchs and the twelve Apostles'" (*Preaching God's Transforming Justice*, Clark M. Williamson). Oh, and let's not forget these four, six-winged living creatures,

that are also mentioned in Ezekiel 1. These majestic creatures show up as a lion, ox, human, and eagle. Many scholars say that these four creatures represent the four Gospels: lion= Matthew, ox= Mark, human=Luke, and eagle= John. And after singing, these four living creatures shout “Amen,” which means “that’s true!” and then the 24 elders fall down before the throne in worship. And, of course, we also find the repetition of the number seven, which indicates completion, perfection, or spiritual wholeness, here. Did you notice that the Lamb has SEVEN traits that are worthy to receive (5:12)? Ok, it’s going to be tempting to get curious about the symbolism throughout Revelation but let’s hold that for another sermon.

Did you notice that the focal point of what I read from Chapters 4 and 5 is the throne?! No other Jewish apocalypse portrays its hero as a Lamb. Yes, Jesus Christ is God’s Passover lamb who has been raised, and who now is worthy of our worship. The word apocalypse- *apo*= “from” *kalptos*= “covering.” John’s Apocalypse is an expose, a Toto moment in *The Wizard of Oz*, of pulling back the curtain to expose the fact that Rome is not the great eternal power it claims to be; therefore, do not worship Rome. True worship occurs when all heaven and all earth join in singing praise to the One who has brought salvation and redemption to all creation. This worship of God and of the Lamb is central; it is the guiding rhythm to the Book of Revelation and hopefully in our lives. Worship is a cycle that each of John’s strange visions returns to over and over again. “What John is creating here in these chapters is a picture of concentric circles. There are angels in the inner ring, then an outer ring of animals and living creatures. And an external ring of a massive crowd of people. And it all center on a focal point- the Lamb- an unmistakable reference to Jesus, the slaughtered Lamb who has now

ascended as ruler of all living things: every creature- in the upper decks of heaven, observing creation from the balcony seats, all the way down into the lowest depths of the oceans, where life should not survive but somehow finds a way- is united in proclamation. There is no corner or nook or cranny that does not contain some part of creation that is in universal agreement that there is one and only one who sits on that throne” (Magrey R. DeVega, *Lectioary Sermon Series*). So then, what can we learn here on earth- thousands of years later- about John’s vision of worship in heaven?

John holds strong with his anti-idolatry campaign in these two chapters by demonstrating what he considers to be proper worship. Revelation 4 demonstrates that God, the real ruler and creator of the world, is at the center of worship. This reminds me of Soren Kierkegaard’ view of Christian worship- a dramatic act where individuals are the actors and God is the audience. Therefore, worship is not about entertaining us. It is about giving glory to God and God alone. This is what puzzles me when people say that worship is boring. Worship isn’t about us, nor about our entertainment. John also reveals a second subject worthy of worship- the slain Lamb, the predominant image for Jesus in Revelation. “By taking the scroll from God, the Lamb becomes God’s agent for establishing God’s sovereignty throughout the world. Every creature in heaven and on earth joins together in worshipping the Lamb on the throne, further suggesting that idols have no place in proper worship” (Bowden). And here’s the real gut punch and fundamental truth: none of us are the ones who sit on that throne. NONE OF US! This must be said over and over again, as it is our human tendency to put ourselves there. We sometimes like to think that we are the

center of the universe. I have this thing I do when someone is feeling this way. I simply hold up my pointer finger and say, "This is you, and this is your world." I'm sarcastic, yes, but I'm really speaking truth. I'm counting on others to do this for me as well. We musn't get too big for our britches, as my grandmother used to say. We can get so wrapped up in our own issues that we think we are the only ones who matter. "But John tells us squarely in Revelation 5 that whenever we fall for those ideas, we fall for the lie that suggests that we are the ones who are sitting on that throne. That all the company of heaven bows at our feet, and all the living creatures listen to our commands, and all the people in our lives and in our world bend to our whims and out discretions. Instead, true Christian worship is all about the One who gave his life for us. This entire vision is not just about the end of time; it is about keeping our priorities straight right now. Life is not about pleasing oneself. It is about living a worshipful life that is pleasing to and honoring God" (DeVega). We must remember that worldly rulers are not worthy of our praise- only God and the Lamb are worthy. No matter what is happening in our lives, joy or pain, the worship of God is essential and hymns can be songs of resistance or defiant requiems filled with hope to come! Let us continue to worship God as along with the four living creatures, the elders, the angels, the communion of saints and all of God creation, as we keep on singing, "Holy, holy, holy, the Lord God the Almighty, who was and is and is to come" (4:8). Amen.