

## **“Glory and Honor and Power”**

Reading: Luke 1:46-55; Revelation 4:1-11

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There are of course many arguments used by those who reject our faith, and as hard as it is for us to accept, there are even times when non-Christians raise some very valid questions about what we believe. But there's one part of our faith where we have them beaten, hands down. There's one area where I've heard even the most hardened atheists confess that they can't compete with us, and that's in our singing. The church has great songs, especially in this Advent season. You may not like all of the church's music, but give me enough time and I guarantee I'll find a song that will stir your heart. For a thousand years the church was the center of the best music in the Western world. We've always been singing. Many parts of the Bible, most notably the Psalms, were probably intended to be sung or chanted, though we've long since lost the tunes. When words just won't do justice to our faith, we put it into song. If you can't remember the details of our theology or the verses of our Scriptures, there's a good chance you'll find that depth somewhere in a song. You don't even have to be a very good singer; in the church, you've got some great songs.

There's something almost magical about music; scientists have studied its effects on us and it does indeed have an impact almost universally. It's powerful stuff. That's a big part of why we sing so much in the church. We take our songs seriously. When Pastor Carey and I plan a worship service, we don't just pick songs that we like or that we think will sound nice, we try very hard to choose songs that will *do* what they need to do at each point in the service. There's the line in the old song *His Eye Is on the Sparrow* that says, "I sing because I'm happy; I sing because I'm free," but that's not all: we sing because singing accomplishes something.

Music and in particular singing is what we most often associate with worship; when we worship, we usually sing. It's absolutely pervasive among God's people throughout history. God's people are a singing, worshipping people. It's really kind of odd when you think about it: Jesus doesn't really have a lot to say about how we ought to sing, and while there are certainly places in the New Testament where worship and singing are mentioned and expected, it's not really something that is dwelt upon. But worship defines us at least as much as anything else we do: as much as service and evangelism and proclamation of the word, God's people sing. The church is the people of God gathered in worship of God.

We need to take a moment and think about this fact especially in this season while we are focusing our attention on the book of Revelation. Our Advent series this year is called "Come, Lord Jesus" because John's Revelation really is one long, beautiful cry for Jesus to come and be present among His people. The whole vision really is a conversation of sorts, or a responsive reading, or a song that is sung antiphonally, with one choir singing one part and another choir responding. If we were to flip through its pages we would see immediately that it's full of song: something happens, and then someone sings about it; someone asks a question, and someone else sings the response. It ends with, "The Spirit and the bride say, 'Come!' And let the one who hears say, 'Come!'" And John the Revelator responds, "Amen. Come, Lord Jesus." Back and forth. I've said before that if someone made a movie out of John's Revelation, it would have to be a musical, because it's just that full of singing.

Last Sunday we began our series by listening in on Jesus' messages to the churches. Again and again, in all of their different circumstances, He told them to repent from evil and hold fast to their first love in Christ. They're facing trouble; they're waiting and wondering about the coming of the Lord: as we struggle in this dark world, as we watch evil apparently continuing to run amok, as time passes and there are some of God's promises that remain unfulfilled, how can we as the church continue to trust in God? How long, Sovereign Lord, until you make things right? When will our faith become sight and our Messiah arrive? And Jesus' answer to them is a somewhat unsatisfying command to be faithful. That's the sort of answer you get when you may have to wait a while. It's as though you have somewhere to be and someone in your family says, "I'll be ready when I'm ready;" the time is coming, but it's not here yet.

And from this command to remain faithful, the vision suddenly expands dramatically. John finds himself in the heavenly throne room of God, with the Lord Himself surrounded by impenetrable light, and representatives of all of creation gathered in eternal worship. "Day and night they never stop saying, 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come.'" There are elders gathered there, perhaps representatives of God's people through the ages, and "they lay their crowns before the throne and say, 'You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power.'" If we could see beyond our bleak earthly circumstances, we would catch a glimpse of the glorious, never-ending heavenly worship service taking place around God's throne.

This is the beginning of the rest of Jesus' answer to John. To the question of "How long, Sovereign Lord?" comes the response: first, remain faithful while you wait, and second, take part in the worship of God. The rest of John's revelation, with all of its creation-redeeming events, takes place in that dual context of faithfulness and worship. In other words, the Advent of the Messiah, whether it's His first Advent that we celebrate at Christmas or His second Advent we look forward to, happens in the midst of God's waiting, worshipping people. We don't cause the arrival of the Messiah, but we prepare the soil, and we also prepare ourselves to be ready to see it and participate in His work.

Our celebration of the season of Advent helps us remember our place in this time between Advents. While we prepare to celebrate Christmas, we also prepare ourselves for the promised return of Jesus. There are parallels in these stories, though they aren't obvious: the cute and harmless baby in the manger hardly resembles the Christ of Revelation with His eyes of blazing fire holding the seven stars in His hand. But as different as these two Advents appear, we still find in both cases that the worshipping people of God are present. The songs surrounding the first Advent don't look much like John's vision of the heavenly throne room, but nevertheless, Advent means worship.

One of the best examples is found in our reading from Luke 1. It's what's known as the Magnificat, the song Jesus' mother Mary sang in the midst of her pregnancy. It embodies so much of what we need to see about our worship. First, it is a song of trust in God. It's Mary's willingness to trust God that opened the way for the first Advent to come; God was looking for someone like Mary who was willing to respond, "I am the Lord's servant. May your word to me be fulfilled." She placed her life, her relationships, and her very body before the throne of God. And so she sings of how God has been faithful through the generations; her worship flows from her position before God. But at the same time, her song is also a powerful message of the reversal that comes with God's kingdom: "He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry

with good things but has sent the rich away empty.” That’s a pretty powerful political statement, one that would be very threatening to certain segments of the population.

We turn the page in that story of the first Advent, and we see more worship. We read of angels filling the sky to sing “Glory to God in the highest heaven” in the company of some shepherds, who then go on to praise God at the birth of the Messiah. We read of Simeon, who waited in the temple courts and encountered the infant Jesus, and sang this song: “Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all nations: a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel.” Again, trust and gratitude to God, but also proclamation of what He’s doing. And this points us to the larger fact that God’s worshipping people are so very often present when God acts. Again, we don’t cause God to do what He does, but our worship is the natural context for and result of God’s work. Last week I came across an example in Paul’s sea voyage to Rome in Acts 27. The ship Paul was on was caught in a terrible storm. After two weeks of suspense, Paul encourages the crew through the simple act of taking bread, giving thanks to God, breaking it, and eating, in a reflection of our Eucharistic meal. That small act of faith was a powerful statement of trust in God in a time of great danger. The kingdom was there in power in that moment of fear.

So *His Eye Is on the Sparrow* is not wrong; we do sing because we’re happy and because we’re free. We do sing out of joy in what God has done. But our acts of worship, whether they’re through song or music or art or prayer or action, are not just expressions of our insides, they are also proclamations of what God is really doing in the world. We sing together because God has made us to be the body of Christ. We sing songs of ancient saints because we want to build up our language of praise, and because God is still working today in the ways He worked in the past. We sing songs of different styles — you sing songs I like and I sing songs you like — because I don’t have enough vocabulary within me to adequately proclaim what God is doing; I need you to teach me your songs, too. We sing songs of hope and trust in times of darkness and doubt, because we trust that God is working in ways we can’t see, and we know that worship is still taking place around His heavenly throne. Our worship is a sign to the world that God’s kingdom is coming.

There’s another side to this that needs to be mentioned. Worship of the Lord is not the only worship we see taking place in John’s Revelation. As the vision progresses, we see the arising of a blasphemous trinity, and idolatrous mockery of our God who exists eternally as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. A trio made up of a dragon, a seven-headed beast from the sea, and a horned beast from the earth. These beasts perform all sorts of miracles and powerful signs, and people all over the world are tempted to worship them. They even have their own prophets to spread their false gospel. What follows is a contest of worship. Sides are chosen, and battle lines are drawn. The one you choose to worship proclaims which kingdom you serve, which kingdom you trust, which kingdom has your faith. The act of worship is a powerful thing; it not only proclaims, it also reveals and enacts the kingdom you are worshipping. That can be a dangerous thing in these days when we have the option of worshipping kingdoms built on consumption, or selfishness, or pride, or greed, or earthly politics, or self-righteousness.

You see, in the end, there is only one kingdom that is coming. Lots of other options for worship will come in the meantime, but there is only one Advent that is deserving of our worship for eternity. There’s a scene later in John’s Revelation that would be comical if it weren’t so deadly

serious: as God's angels pour out the bowls of God's wrath, the members of that blasphemous trinity and their agents are revealed for what they are. The demonic spirits giving them power are forced out of their mouths in the form of frogs. Hardly as impressive as the one whose word is a double-edged sword. What we worship will be revealed for what it is in the end. In the meantime, in this age between the first Advent and the second, we are called to participate in the eternal worship of Jesus Christ the Lord, the one who is truly worthy. Your life is an act of worship one way or another, whether you're a singer or not. This Advent season, let's worship rightly.



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