

“A Heavenly Choir”

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Fourth in a periodic series, “Calling Ourselves Names”¹

A modified version was preached at Bethany UC, and a shorter version at Elora UC.

Revelation 15.2-4

October 19, 2014

Then I saw what appeared to be a sea of glass mixed with fire. Those who gained victory over the beast, its image, and the number of its name were standing by the glass sea, holding harps from God. They sing the song of Moses, God’s servant, and the song of the Lamb, saying,

“Great and awe-inspiring are your works,
Lord God Almighty.
Just and true are your ways,
king of the nations.
Who won’t fear you, Lord, and glorify your name?
You alone are holy.
All nations will come and fall down in worship before you,
for your acts of justice have been revealed.”

Revelation 15.2-4
(Common English Bible)

I’ll begin with an old Far Side cartoon, by Gary Larson. It is one panel, split in two. At the top we see people, standing on a cloud. They are dressed normally, but with wings sprouting from their backs. They’re in a line, and an angel is handing them things. He says, “Welcome to heaven. Here’s your harp.” Move now to the bottom of the panel. We see people in a similar line, but in a dark cave with fire licking their legs. Now it’s a demon giving them things, and saying, “Welcome to hell. Here’s your accordion.” (My apologies to accordion connoisseurs.)

Instrumental preferences aside, this does suggest that worship can be heavenly or hellish.

I

Our scripture today is from the Book of Revelation. This book wraps up the Bible. Revelation starts with worship.² It ends with worship.³ Between is a whole lot of weirdness, and, worship.

The weirdness serves a vital purpose. Revelation is full of visions which are unimaginable.

¹ The previous sermons in this series are: “Sharing Life” (October 21, 2012), “A Public Display” (October 20, 2013), and “Jesus Gets Married” (March 23, 2014).

² John the Seer tells us he was “in the Spirit on the Lord’s day” when he received the visions (Rev. 1.10).

³ Revelation 22.8-9.

With the unimaginable, it blows open our imaginations. Revelation reveals. It unveils and discloses. That's work for wild poetry, not prose. Revelation gives us a glimpse behind the scenes, to see what is really going on. Revelation peeks through the clutter and comfort of everything we take for normal, the flat ways we read reality. It peeks through. With its weirdness, God wipes our sleepy eyes. Then we can see what God is really doing, what is really going on in the world. We can see how things are now, and where they are heading by God's good grace and in God's good time.⁴

And when we see, we see worship.

In Revelation, we see the twenty-four Elders worship.⁵ (That's "elder" as a title, not a surname!)⁶ We see the Angels worship.⁷ And the four Living Creatures worship.⁸ It's weird. And it's worship.

Not all worship is good, however. In Revelation we see worship going to the wrong things, by accident. Even the most marvelous beings in God's creation must not be worshipped; only God the Creator.⁹ In Revelation we also see worship given to evil beings: the Dragon, and the Beast. Hellish worship.¹⁰ Still, despite terrible persecution, some remain faithful, worshipping God alone.¹¹

You could say the battle Revelation describes is about who gets worshipped.

What matters most in our worship is not how sincere we are, nor how informative, uplifting, engaging, or excellent our worship is. These are important. But most important is who we are worshipping.

It's a bit like if I buy romantic flowers. The amount I spend or the beauty of the bouquet matter, but what's vital is who I give them to. Get that right, and it's heavenly. Get it wrong . . . hellish.

Both heavenly and hellish worship can feature harps. Both can feature accordions, or pipe

⁴ For an insightful interpretation, see Richard Bauckham, The Theology of the Book of Revelation (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1993)

⁵ Revelation 4.10, 5.14, 11.16, 19.4.

⁶ This Sunday, Elora United Church was celebrating the end of Louise Elder's ministry with us as our music director. She had served in that role for 16 years.

⁷ Revelation 7.11.

⁸ Revelation 19.4.

⁹ Twice John attempts to worship the angel who is his guide through the visions, and is rebuked. Revelation 19.10 and 22.8-9.

¹⁰ Revelation 13.4,8, and 12.

¹¹ Revelation 14.7, 13.15 and 20.4.

organs, or any instrument imaginable. Heavenly and hellish worship can be equally sincere, interesting, inspiring, fascinating, entertaining. Both can be done really well. Yet vital is who or what are we worshipping. Who we worship decides whether our worship is hellish, or heavenly.

Who we worship decides whether we are a church.

II

What does it mean to be a church? One way to think about this is to reflect on the images and words the Bible uses to describe us. For instance, we are a *koinonia*, a community of sharing. We are an *ekklesia*, a public assembly called out to work for the community we live in. We are Jesus' body. We are the Spirit's temple. We are a household. We are a people.

We are a choir, singing to God.

We have our choir, and a praise team, and Exploding Church Fury.¹² We have musicians and soloists. We have, of course, our music leader.

That's just the start, though. We are all the choir. That means you who mumble through the words. That means you who always hits a note, though rarely the right one. You, who have the rhythm of a lawnmower running out of gas. Yes, you! You are part of this choir.

What we heard today from the book of Revelation is the choir, singing to God. They have made it through the toughest of times, and not abandoned their trust in God nor worshipped the Beast. (Remember, it's weird!). And all the way, they sing.

We sing! All of our songs—the old ones and the new ones, the ones you like and the ones you'd rather we forget—all our songs are part of this choir's playlist. Along with countless others neither of us have heard yet. Some songs are long-forgotten on earth, but not in heaven. Some are not yet written, and will be set to instruments still to be invented.

Our songs are those of Moses, leading God's people from slavery to freedom. Our songs are of God's Lamb, Jesus our Saviour. We sing of God doing great things. We sing of God's ways, faithful and just. We sing of God's rightness. We sing of God, sovereign over all other powers. We sing of God, holy, holy holy.

We don't just speak. We sing, because standing-still words won't do justice to the material

¹² The name our youth band has given itself. In truth, they aren't very furious. Nor have we yet to witness an explosion. Nonetheless, they are really good, and help us to worship well.

of God's grace. Our words are going to need to sway, and hop, and slide, and shimmy. Our words will need to rhyme, and leap on notes that step all over the staff.

Singing intensifies our language. Just try this. Open a hymn book, and read aloud the words to "How Great Thou Art." Wonderful words. Now, sing those same words, in a congregation with an organ playing under your voices. It's an entirely different experience.

Singing words says so much more than merely the stringing together of vowels and consonants ever could alone.¹³

III

We need to sing, and so the church is a choir.

Not just us all here. This choir, you can't squeeze into a sanctuary, nor pack it into a concert hall. This choir overflows any sports stadium. For this choir is global, as far as folks hear Jesus' call to follow him.

Not just us now. This choir has been signing up members since the very beginning, and will keep adding more until everything is complete. This choir stretches through time, whenever folks have heard and will hear God's creating and redeeming proclamation.

The Old Testament is full of choir members, singing to God. The New Testament is full of choir members, singing to God. The church's story is an honour roll of choir members, singing to God.

So God's people sing.

When you are singing, you are standing beside old Moses, whose feet sank in the mud at the bottom of the Red Sea, and on the other side danced free.

In the aisle is Miriam, his sister, banging on her tamborine.

There is Deborah, a mother for Israel when it was in a time of great need.

¹³ Eugene Peterson wrote, "During the act of worship something has been happening to the worshipers: minds are cleared; perceptions come into focus; spirits are renewed. As this takes place, ordinary speech, impatient of pedestrian prose, dances – is condensed into poetry and then raised into tune. Worship sings. Singing is speech intensified and expanded. Song takes the natural rhythms and timbre of speech and develops its accents and intonations into music." Reversed Thunder: The Revelation of John and the Praying Imagination (San Francisco: Harper, 1988), 66.

And David, lost in thought, working on his newest psalm composition.

Mary is raising her soprano, and pulling tyrants from their thrones.

Angels that sang above the hillsides of Bethlehem are now hovering over your head.

Over there are some of Jesus' first disciples, singing the psalms they sung that Passover night, as they walked from the last supper to the Garden of Gethsemane. It was a heavy time, and not all the songs we sing will be joyful. But they will all be good.

In the back there, Paul and Silas are letting rip some jailhouse rock.

Louise, thank you for helping us sing with them.

We're going to keep singing! Because God is worth praising! And it is always heavenly.