10th Sunday after Pentecost Rev. 4:1-11

August 7, 2022 Trinity, Stephens City

A quick little musical quiz. I’m going to sing portions of three worship songs. Listen, and after I sing, tell me what these songs have in common.

(Sing) “Holy, holy, holy! All the saints adore thee, casting down their golden crowns around the glassy sea. Cherubim and Seraphim falling down before thee, which wert and art and ever more shalt be.”

“My Lord, what a morning. My Lord what a morning. O my Lord what a morning when the stars begin to fall.”

(Love Divine All Loves Excelling” “Finish then thy new creation, Pure and spotless let us be. Let us see thy great salvation Perfectly restored in thee! Changed from glory into glory, till in heav’n we take our place, Till we cast our crowns before thee, Lost in wonder, love, and praise.”

What they have in common? They were all inspired by the words of Revelation. And there are many more! Those participating in the Bible Challenge who are currently reading Revelation can have some fun finding other passages put to music.

For all the inspiration the book of Revelation has given to our hymnody, the readings of the church year-especially in Advent- and to the symbols of Christianity, in Lutheran circles it tends to be the least studied book of the bible. Why? Well, I think there are several reasons.

Perhaps, first and foremost, it’s been written that Martin Luther did not think Revelation should have been included in the canon. As late as the 4th Century, the books we know as Hebrews, James, Jude, 2 & 3 John, 2Peter and Revelation were questioned as having the authority necessary to be included in the New Testament. It wasn’t until the 7th century that the Bible we know today came into being. Luther didn’t outright reject the Revelation of St. John, but he thought persons should be careful reading it and trying to find interpretations in it. He felt its message is difficult to understand and authority were questionable.

Second, as Luther thought, it’s difficult to interpret the symbolic language and first-century references of Revelation to modern Christians and for modern times.

Third, this book has been coopted by fundamentalist sects of Christianity and others as means to instill fear, to render judgements on individuals and other religions and to promote so-called predictions for the future of humanity and the planet. For example: Some of us may remember that Ronald Reagan was once said to be the “Anti-Christ” because his first, middle and last names all had 6 letters. According to Revelation, 666 is the number of the Beast, the Anti-Christ. Of course, there have been many people before and after Pres. Reagan whose names contain the number.

There’s a lot of stuff in Revelation that is strange and rather scary; however, I think it’s important to read and ponder how this book might speak to us, today. However, we must first be aware of the CONTEXT of its writing. The exact identity of the author known as John of Patmos or John the Divine is unknown. We are told that he wrote while in exile on a small island off the west coast of Turkey. He was writing in late the First Century to Jewish Christ-followers who are suffering under the domination of Rome. The so-called “code language” and symbolic numbers in the book would probably have been understood by the people of the seven communities to whom John wrote. If we try to take the words literally, not only will we misunderstand but also we will miss the overall message of hope in Christ.

The narrative lectionary has appointed the readings from Revelation we will be studying. As a result, we’re skipping the first three chapters of the book. In Chapter 1, John is given his purpose by an angelic vision. He shares this apocalyptic vision with seven church communities in cities located in what is now Turkey. The second and third chapters are personal letters to these communities. Each Church is addressed according to its own challenges and ministries. Following the letters, John provides and extensive description of the vision of heaven and the end times beginning in Chapter 4 where he describes being transported to the heavenly throne room of God the Creator who is surrounded by four fantastic creatures and elders in the faith and heavenly host.

For the people of the early Church, this heavenly vision would have been understood as a direct challenge to the Roman emperor who claimed divinity and required worship as god of the world. For those of Jewish background, it was an abomination to bow to a human as God, but their lives and welfare of their families were at risk if they refused. Those that did, like John, probably, were either exiled or crucified.

John’s vision confirms the supremacy of the God of Israel. While Caesar claimed godship on earth, both heaven and earth are the realm of God who created everything. This God alone deserves worship and praise. God is at the center of the universe God created and ordered through the Word. The four living creatures around the throne represent the created order- wild and domestic animals, bird and human being. Of course, the human being is not in center as god but with all creation joins in praise. Also gathered around the throne are the elders as heavenly representatives of the community of faith. The action of “casting their crowns before God” shows their total devotion to God as Lord of all. It seems that the number of elders-24- represents the 12 apostles and the 12 patriarchs-tribes of Israel. All is at peace in this realm of God of the past present and future.

This first scene in John’s vision sets the stage for what will come. It shows the supremacy of the Creator God and prepares the readers for the struggles to come. The emphasis is on whom they worship as the true God and how this worship becomes the means of staying strong in the midst of trials and tribulations. In all that happens, look to God the Creator of all, the Lord of all, the one who promises a new heaven and a new earth.

During this week as I was thinking about the message for today, I heard a song that seemed to speak to the message of the throne room vision of worship and praise of God. I wish I could tell you the name and artist, but I heard it on K-Love radio station. Basically, the singer told how he gave God praise no matter what he experienced in life- the bad times and the good times. The message of the song is familiar, for biblical witnesses have expressed their worship and praise even when evil was surrounding them – take, for instance the Psalms.

The message for today is two-fold. First, it’s personal: A life of worship of God, of singing praise, of giving honor to God the Creator first and foremost- even when it seems that God is not present- provides the ability to weather any storm-present or future. Second, it’s corporate- for the church and the community of worship. For the churches of Revelation, it was worship that would hold the communities together in the midst of the persecution by Roman. For us, not only is our gathering for worship necessary for the life, ministry and witness of the church but also it is our direct connection to the liturgy of heaven. As Dr. Gerhardt Krodel wrote in his commentary on Revelation, “The same God is worshiped on earth as well as in heaven- using the same words, “Holy, holy, holy; Hallelujah and Amen!”