

 **Main Street**  
UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



**Revelation 4:1-11**  
**“What Are They Doing In Heaven Today”**

October 4, 2015  
(19<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost/ World Communion Sunday)

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**“Following Christ From City Center!”**

IIIA1: REVELATION 4:1-11 "WHAT ARE THEY DOING IN HEAVEN TODAY?"

Contrast Puny Churches, Great God In Heaven

1) v.1 INTRODUCTION TO THE NEW VISION AND AUDITION. Who Rules? Who Is Worthy?

Diptych//5:1-14, Begins Second Revelatory Cycle, Chap. 4-22

a) v.1a What He Saw: An Open Door To Heaven. 3:10 (Woes), 21 (Thrones) = Caption for 4:1ff.

After this I looked, and lo (behold), in heaven an open door! 3:20-21, Initiative: Ezek. 1:1, I Enoch 14:15, T. Levi 5:1 New Vision, 7:1, 9; 15:5; 18:1, 19:1; Dan. 7:6 (Decisive Que)

b) v.1b What He Heard: An Invitation From Same Voice (Risen Lord). Christ's Voice, 1:10, 18

And the first voice, which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet, said, INVITATION TO HEAVEN "Come up hither, and I will show you what must take place after this." JOHN'S JOURNEY, NOT RAPTURE! 1:9-3:22 = Revelation/No Heavenly Journey, 5:1-8:1 = Heavenly Journey From Situation Of Churches To Entire World: Reassurance

2) vv.2-11 SOUNDS AND SIGHTS OF HEAVEN'S WORSHIP AND OF GOD'S CENTRALITY.

First Image Of "After This" Is Worship, True Power, Not Disasters (Seals)

a) vv.2-6a God's Glorious & Awesome Throne: 3 Stones, 24 Elders. //Oriental Monarch/Court

At once I was "in the Spirit," 17:3, 1:10, Prophetic Mindset, Real Authority: Not Rome, Glory Reveals/Conceals and lo (behold) A THRONE stood in heaven, with one seated on the throne! Is. 6:1-4, Glory Seen, 20:11, 22:1,3

And he who sat here appeared like jasper and carnelian, Clear/Red, First/Last Jewels In Priest's Ephod: Ex. 28:17-21 Rainbow = Promise of Mercy, Gen. 9:12-13, Ezek. 1:28

a1 and round the throne was a rainbow that looked like an emerald. Tribe of Judah/David/Jesus, Gen. 9, Ez.1:28

4 2 Round the throne were twenty-four thrones, 12 + 12, 21:12-14, Astral Decans, Elders Worship/ Explain, 21:12-14

b and seated on the thrones were TWENTY-FOUR ELDERS, Council, 2:10, 3:5, 21; 1 Chron. 24:1-19 clad in white garments, with GOLDEN CROWNS upon their heads. Royal Priests/ Church, 1:6

(1) (2) (3) Numinous Power, Danger Of Approach

b' From the throne issue flashes of lightning, and voices and peals of thunder, Ex. 19:16, Ps. 18:17-19, Ez. 1:13

a'1 and before the throne burn seven torches of fire, which are the seven spirits of God; 1:4b, 12, 2:1, 3:1 = HS

6 2 And before the throne there is as it were a sea of glass, like crystal. Red/Clear, Abyss, Symbolic Location of Evil, 13:1 21:1 Sea Is No More, Unfinished Agenda, Ez. 1:22-26, 2 Enoch 3:3

On Throne = Power, Circled By Rainbow = Mercy

b) vv.6b-7 The Four Living Creatures (Angels/Cherubim): Ezek. 1, 4:1-14, Is. 6:1-8.

And round the throne, on each side of the throne, are four living creatures, Circles, Lit. "in the center" full of eyes in front and behind: Wisdom, Insight Of Seraphim, I En. 71:77, 2 En. 20:1, 21:1, 22:2

7 the first living creature like a lion, Wild animal, Fire sign, Leo the second living creature like an ox, Domestic animal Earth sign, Taurus the third living creature with the face of a man, Greatest animal, Water sign, Scorpio and the fourth living creature like a flying eagle. Air animal, Air sign Pegasus

All Creation Oriented To Creator, Their Function Is Praise

b') v.8 Song (1:19) Of The Creatures To God In Worship. Irenaeus Saw 4 Gospels Here

8 And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, Isaiah 6:1ff, I En. 39:12 are full of eyes all round and within, and day and night they never cease to sing, No End, No Solos In Book

Trisagion "Holy, / holy, / holy, God Is Object Of Worship, Domitian Not Deus et Dominus, Suetonius Domitian 13.2 Omnipotence Is the Lord / God / Almighty, (7x), Canticle 1, Is. 6:3, ADORATION OF SERAPHIM: SANCTUS, 1:8 Eternal who was/ and is/ and is to come." 1 Enoch 39:12, God Is The Object Of Worship In Song, Amen At 5:14 "the whole earth is full of his glory" omitted from Isaiah 6:3, Not yet true?

a') vv.9-11 Song (2:19) Of The Twenty-Four Elders to God. All Creation Is Oriented Towards God

9 1 And whenever the living creatures give glory/ and honor/ and thanks (1) Perfections, (2)Gratitude to him who is seated on the THE THRONE, who lives for ever and ever, God Is Everlasting, Without Body/Parts

Anti-Gnostic: Our Creator Is Our Redeemer, No Split

10 2 the TWENTY-FOUR ELDERS fall down before him who is seated on the throne 3:5,2:10,3:21,Ps. 95:6 and worship him who lives for ever and ever; 4 Actions: Fall/Worship/Cast/ Sing, Roman Imperial Court

Worship Is A Statement Of Loyalty, Therefore Political

2' they cast (continually) their CROWNS before the throne, singing, SURRENDER/ HOMAGE

Imperial Court Ceremonial: Lesser Kings, Tacitus Ann. 15.29

11 1' "Worthy art thou, / our Lord/ and God, 2nd Person, PRAISE/CONFESSION, Jab At Emperor Domitian, Suet. Com. 13 to receive glory /and honor /and power, Direct Address, Canticle 2, Not To Praise Does Not Diminish God, But Us! for thou didst create all things, / and by thy will they exist/ and were created." Basis For Praise = Creator God

Properly Ordered World, Powerful Creator Who Guides/Controls History, Is Merciful; It's All God's

## WHAT ARE THEY DOING IN HEAVEN TODAY?

*"...and day and night they never cease to sing..."*

What occupies the innermost circle of angels.

### REVELATION 4 : 8

**W**hen I was six years old a yearly tradition began on CBS. It was December 1959 and the movie was *The Wizard of Oz*. For the first five years it was on a December Sunday evening at 6:00 followed by Ed Sullivan at 8:00.

About seventy minutes into the film Dorothy, the Lion, Scarecrow and Tin Man arrive at the Emerald City to meet the Wizard who is reputed to hold the power to solve each travelers' problems. The Lion is not alone in his cowardice as they enter the large inner sanctum. There they are greeted with an explosion and billows of green smoke. When the smoke clears, a giant, menacing, bodiless head shouts, "I am Oz, the great and terrible! Who are you?"

Dorothy attempts a halting response, but the Wizard booms, "Silence! The great and powerful Oz knows why you are here! Step forward, Tin Man."

The Tin Man approaches quaking to hear the Wizard say, "You dare come to me for a heart, you clinking, clanking, clattering collection of caliginous junk?"

To the Scarecrow, he shouts, "You have the effrontery to ask for a brain, you billowing bale of bovine fodder?"

To the Cowardly Lion, Oz shouts, "And you, Lion?" and our furry friend faints.

This, sadly, is similar to the unflattering picture many call to mind when they think of God. The Wizard puts on a false show of majesty, but there is no love, no grace, no mercy. In several places, Scripture gives an awesome picture of the holiness of God and the reverence God inspires. At Mount Sinai as well as in visions given to Isaiah and Ezekiel, God is manifest in fire and smoke and sound, at times surrounded by mysterious angels. That is who God shows himself to be. But God is also loving and compassionate.<sup>1</sup> The God who commands and invites our worship is awesome beyond imagining and loving beyond anything we know:

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<sup>1</sup> PreachingToday.com search under Revelation 4:1-11.

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**Revelation 4:1-11** ..... 4

*Holy, holy, holy, the One and Three God who always was and ever will be, the One who made and sustains creation, the center of a rightly ordered world, the Lord of history, the One heaven worships without ceasing because of the truth and joy of it, the true and living God who is other than creation and not to be confused with it, yet who reveals himself through the vast and integrated handiwork of creation and makes it ring with his glorious presence to invite the whole world to turn back to the Lord after the great and long rebellion.*

This is the One just beyond sight, and John saw not God’s face– which no one can see and live<sup>2</sup>– but his glory as he was invited on a journey to the world above through an open door that appeared. Christians are dualists; we believe there are only two realities: the Living God who is self-existent, and then everything God made, which is dependent and contingent, meaning it did not have to be. And what God made– the creation– has two parts, the visible place where we dwell– called *earth*, and the invisible-to-us realm where the transcendent God chooses to be seen– called *heaven*. The two realms overlap and interlock; they are constantly interactive, sometimes in ways we can observe by effects, as when a miracle happens or a prayer is suddenly answered or when God speaks and we know you’ve been addressed.

Heaven is the control room where God’s rule is unchallenged; earth is the theatre of operations where God’s rule is challenged at multiple levels by rebellious human beings and fallen angels who only make things worse by their agitations and temptations. And when taken at face value, our most common prayer is for a final resolution between the two conflicting realms; we pray for the upper realm to come down and engulf and cleanse the lower realm, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, down here on earth– where all the pain and problems are– as it now is in heaven above where your rule is the only law and all are happy about it. But even heaven as the place where God is seen does not encompass or exhaust God, because God is more than anything God made, but the holy and transcendent God lets the divine light be seen in heaven and the divine voice be heard there. This commitment to identify with creation for the sake of communion is completed in Jesus of Nazareth, whom we claim is the human face of God the Son. God first dwelt in heaven, but then came down even further to get near to us in Jesus.

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<sup>2</sup> Exodus 33:20, “But,” he said to Moses, “you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live.”

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**Revelation 4:1-11** ..... 5

The vision given to John was not of something far away, just invisible to us unless we are given a peek. A portal opened; John was invited into a God-centered vision of all that is, and it was arranged like the court of an ancient oriental monarch. At the center a glorious throne, then an inner circle of attendants, mysterious hybrid angels full of eyes and song, encircled by twenty-four lesser thrones with elders who fall down in prostration while casting their crowns in perpetual homage. Heaven is God-centered and worship-filled with light and sound and song and lots of activity from all sorts of layers of beings. And so when we gather on Sunday mornings at 8:30 and 11:00, we are joining something that in heaven never stops. In an inadequate way we mimic here below some of what is going on above, and we are never nearer those realities than when God’s Book is read and we come to the table to hear the amazing words, “The body and blood of Christ given for you.”

Have you ever noticed that when you experience something deeply good and fully engaging, an event or insight that sets heart and mind on fire, you want to tell how good it is? A new book, a new movie, a great vacation, a new love. It’s not just enough to have the experience; to fully enjoy it you must praise it, “Isn’t she lovely?” “Wasn’t that great?” “Can you believe he made the shot?” We do it without a thought because it’s how we’re designed. We are made to enjoy and wired to praise, to recognize the worth of something, and at the top of the pyramid of inherent worth is the Trine God, our highest good. C.S. Lewis put it this way, “Fully to enjoy is to glorify. In commanding us to glorify Him, God is inviting us to enjoy Him.”<sup>3</sup> It is in worship, as John saw on full display, that we are most fully human since we were designed to know and love and enjoy God. “Worship,” wrote Tim Keller, “is seeing what God is worth and giving him what he’s worth.”

Several years ago I was teaching a class on twelve classic Christian practices or disciplines,<sup>4</sup> what Andrew Thompson calls *faith habits* or *the art of holy living*.<sup>5</sup> The next topic was worship, something we do together at least weekly to hold us open to God’s influence, because when we stop worshiping we put ourselves back at the center of life. I came up with a list of ways worship is turned into something other than sustained attention to God:

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[www.cslewisinstitute.org/God\\_Invites\\_Us\\_to\\_Enjoy\\_Him](http://www.cslewisinstitute.org/God_Invites_Us_to_Enjoy_Him)

<sup>4</sup> Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline* (San Francisco, CA: Harper and Row, 1999).

<sup>5</sup> *The Means of Grace* (Wilmore, KY: Seedbed, 2015), xix, 103.

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**Revelation 4:1-11** ..... 6

1. Worship as entertainment. Engaging and well planned is not the same as entertaining. When human response is the chief concern, something other than worship is going on; we play to the wrong audience.
2. Worship as fund-raising. The offering of ourselves through the offering of money is an integral act of worship, but hammering people is not.
3. Worship as therapy. Deep things happen when people are in God's presence, but dealing with your feelings and life problems is not the purpose of worship. When a pastor is more amateur psychologist than biblical theologian, worship has been bent to a lesser good and even a lesser god. Worship lifts you out of yourself into the objectivity of God.
4. Worship as personality cult. When the focus is on the excellence of the music or the eloquence of the preacher, and when Christians trade churches based on the notoriety of either, something other than divine worship is happening. Quality is not bad; it is highly preferable, but neither is it the goal of worship which is sustained attention to God.
5. Worship as information or education. We learn profound things in worship and are shaped in ways that go beyond the rational, but when the sermon is the primary focus and all else is preliminary to the main event, something's lost. Without biblical preaching, God's people are not informed, but processing information is not the same as a meeting with the One to whom Scripture points. Information alone is not enough for transformation. We learn in order to love God and one another.
6. Worship as the promotion of programs. The life of a local church is important, but when recruiting keep intruding, something's wrong. Keeping people busy is no substitute for sustained attention to God.

What these diversions share is they turn worship from an event *about God* into an event *about us*. God is de-centered. We and our concerns move to center stage. Worship becomes one more pragmatic exercise in productive, happy living, or a heavenly Valium to get us through another week of stress. "Fill me up, preacher; I'm empty." The prophet Eugene Peterson stung my conscience with his honesty:

"I'm convinced pastors don't give two cents about worship. They really

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don't. And there's a reason for it. True worship doesn't make anything happen. It is a losing of control, a weaning from manipulative language and entertainment... Pastors sense that if they really practice worship they are going to empty out the sanctuary pretty fast."<sup>6</sup>

He's right; worship is worthless, that is, unless you believe in the Living and Triune God revealed in Jesus and in the Holy Spirit who has the power and authority to rip open the heavens and bring the other world before us at any time. Worship is to cultivate an appetite for God as the highest of all human duties and our chief delight. It is dress rehearsal for the kingdom of God. Behind the appearances, pain, and chaos of this world is another world, invisible to us unless revealed, peopled with creatures and critters we've never seen, and in the place called *heaven* the preoccupation is worship. They are enraptured with the God whose glory veils his face. All are mystics and poets and hymn writers and dancers and ecstatic without self-consciousness; they are lost in God.

### TURNING TO THE TEXT

It is into the realm just beyond sight that John is invited by the voice of the risen Jesus and the transporting power of the Holy Spirit. Revelation, chapter 4, verse 1:

“After this I looked, and lo, in heaven an open door! And the first voice, which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet, said, ‘Come up hither, and I will show you what must take place after this.’”

To this call John again exercised faith and said an inward *Yes*. How do we know that? Because his next words are “At once I was *in the Spirit*.” When we say Yes to divine initiative, it is the Holy Spirit that makes it happen, whatever the *it* is. Our consent is important, but it is not our willing that makes it so. John did not bang the door open. It was opened from within, *from the other side*, and he consented to be carried through it. So if you are not hearing from God, go back and ask, “What was the last divine invitation I declined?” Ask God why you said No and what it would mean to say Yes again. Divine invitations always come with an RSVP.

There are two ways to receive divine revelation. The first is for the Trinity to invade your world with one of the divine persons or an angel taking the lead; the

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<sup>6</sup> *The Door*, Nov./Dec. 1991.

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**Revelation 4:1-11** ..... 8

other is to be invited into a heavenly journey. In the first God *comes down* to your earthly abode, and in the second you *go up* to God's heavenly world. The initial vision of the risen Jesus and the letters to the seven churches which opened the Book of Revelation was a *come down* revelation;<sup>7</sup> the vision of heaven's throne room, however, is a *come up* revelation.<sup>8</sup> John was invited to enter heaven.

This is not a picture of the rapture of the church as some wrongly teach to the confusion of millions.<sup>9</sup> This is not the permanent escape of the church from history just before the end but the temporary lifting of one man— John the prophet— for a specific revelatory purpose. Any first century reader of Jewish literature would understand this way of speaking about religious experience.<sup>10</sup> In a two level creation of heaven and earth, God may come down to reveal, or we may go up to hear and see. And when people claim such experiences in our day, as in the current spate of *I-died-and-went-to-heaven-for-twenty-minutes* books and movies, we have to weigh them to see if they match Scripture and the character of God revealed in Jesus; and if not, we dismiss them as deceptions, as with *The Book of Mormon*. People have all sorts of experiences and make all sorts of claims; our job as thoughtful Christians is to sift through the accounts in order to answer several questions: Is this from above? Is this from below? Or, is this merely human as in the recent revelation that one man made the whole thing up and turned it into the New York Times best selling novel *The Boy Who Came Back From Heaven*.<sup>11</sup> That the author's last name was *Malarkey* should have been a clue! That it was published by Tyndale House without being properly

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<sup>7</sup> Revelation 1:9-20, 2:1-3:22.

<sup>8</sup> On these two types as conventions of ancient Jewish apocalyptic literature, see Charles Talbert, *Revelation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1994), 27.

<sup>9</sup> See Daymond Duck and Larry Richards, *Revelation: God's Word For The Biblically Inept* (Lancaster, PENN: Starburst Publishers, 1998), 62-73 who summarize dispensational teaching on this matter for a popular audience. On the rise of rapture theology in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, see James Efird, *Revelation for Today* (Nashville, TN: Abington, 1989).

<sup>10</sup> For an introduction to standard apocalyptic elements in the New Testament, see T.C. Smith, *Reading the Signs: A Sensible Approach to Revelation and Other Apocalyptic Writings* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 1997), especially chapter 6, "The Book of Revelation," 85-122.

<sup>11</sup> [nypost.com/2015/01/16/teen-admits-he-lied-about-dying-going-to-heaven](http://nypost.com/2015/01/16/teen-admits-he-lied-about-dying-going-to-heaven).

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vettted is a major embarrassment to an otherwise reputable publishing house, but they know this stuff sells! In a day where *my experience* is everything and both Scripture and doctrine neglected, we must not give up the art of careful, patient, communal discernment. The reason the Book of Revelation made the final cut for the New Testament— after a long and controversial debate— was that it was judged to be in line with the apostolic faith and useful to the church over time.<sup>12</sup> That it was placed last as a *Jesus Wins!* finale says you need to sink into the first twenty-five documents— the gospels and Acts and epistles— before you take on the last one.

It is important that John heard the *same voice* as before. He’s still listening to the risen Jesus, not some imposter. In a world where many have visions and claim to speak for God on the basis of supposed new revelations, the church checks all by the voice of Jesus as recorded in his four biographies. Is it in line with what we know of him? Does it line up with the Scripture and the classic faith of the church? Does it bear good fruit in people’s lives, or does it distract them from the love of God and neighbor? And if the answers are negative, we reject the claims as insufficient. We say Yes to people and their culture, even some of their insights, but No to their claims of revelation if they are not harmonious with Jesus. On the substance of our faith, Jesus is all God has to say, because the Son is sent to us from inside the Trinitarian communion.<sup>13</sup> He did not arise out of the aspirations of human history but was sent into it. The church explores this revelation and its echoes under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and in Scripture over time, but what more is there to say after God makes a personal appearance, as was done in Jesus? No new revelation beyond this, though there remains the application of divine revelation to new circumstances.

John is in exile on the island of Patmos; his body can be located by longitude and latitude based on its mass and density. But he, by means of the Holy Spirit, is also, at least for a time, bi-located in another realm with his senses heightened but fully intact. He is at the same time *on earth* and *in heaven*. A glimpse of what’s going on in heaven from John’s journey provides hope and endurance for a church

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<sup>12</sup> On the history of controversy and canonical reception, see Talbert, *Revelation: 1-2*; Grant Osborne, *Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2002), 23-24; M. Eugene Boring, *Revelation* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1989), 2-5.

<sup>13</sup> For a discussion, see Dennis Okholm, “More Than One Way? Affirming the Uniqueness of Christ’s Person and Work in a Pluralistic Culture,” *Theology Matters*, Jan./Feb. 2002, 6-12.

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under pressure to conform to imperial culture. To be precise, John does not claim he saw God. His language is reserved and indirect which offers an insight. What he reports is a throne, one seated thereon, and then says that God *appeared like* a glorious and symbolic jeweled light show with each color speaking volumes. Jasper and carnelian were the first and last jewels on the high priest's breastplate, so God's people Israel are part of his reflected glory.<sup>14</sup> Emerald was the stone for the tribe of Judah, for King David and finally Jesus himself.<sup>15</sup> The throne of divine power is encircled with a green rainbow of mercy. What was promised to Noah after the flood is available to us through Jesus as a permanent attribute of God. God's reflected glory can be seen, God's person and face cannot because God is not a creature. We see the energies of God, not the essence, the symbols of deity, not the personal substance behind them. And that is because, as our first doctrinal statement teaches, God is an "Eternal Spirit" and "without body or parts."<sup>16</sup> Not *the man upstairs* of American folk religion, because God is not a gendered, embodied creature like us.

Now when visions come, they are always filtered through cultural lenses. For us the imagery of a heavenly journey might differ, but the theology underneath it would be the same. For John the cultural filters are an ancient world of emperors and kings and their court protocols. He uses the literary models of the prophets Daniel and Ezekiel and Isaiah who had similar visions and whose language shapes John's own.<sup>17</sup> At the center of the invisible world now become visible is the throne and rule of God. Heaven is God-centered, and when rightly with God down below, so are we.

This God is alone in majesty but not isolated. Round the throne John saw twenty-four other thrones, each with an elder wearing a crown and the white garments of holiness. Even in heaven there is delegated authority. God delights to work with and through the free cooperation of his creatures, human and angelic. Did you know that you have a throne and a crown, a realm of influence where your voice counts, and the question is, What will you do with your little kingdom? Will you honor the One who gave it and continually cast your crown before God in worship, or will you take

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<sup>14</sup> Exodus 28:17-21.

<sup>15</sup> Daniel Harrington, *Revelation* (Collegeville, MN: Michael Glazier, 1993), 79.

<sup>16</sup> *The Book of Discipline 2012*: 63-64.

<sup>17</sup> On the parallel language, see Mark Wilson, *Charts on the Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2007), 71-73.

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the energies of body and mind, natural talents and opportunities and use them apart from God for things he never intended? That is what Satan did, and that rebellion of pride is what makes him the Devil and our Adversary. In the desert temptations he even tried to recruit Jesus to deflect worship from God to him. Our worshipping God drives the devil batty. Praise is a weapon; worship is potent spiritual warfare. It is lining ourselves up with what is most real. So if you are seated firmly upon the throne of your life thinking your stuff is your own and can be used without reference to God, how deluded you are, unlike these elders who are closer to the reality of the Lord than any of us. They see God, and here is what they do: they *stand* in respect, they *fall on their faces* in humility, they *continually cast their crowns* in homage, they *sing* of the worth and creativity of God. Lots of motion and commotion up there, a riot of color and sound and motion and splendor round the throne. Charles Spurgeon once quipped, “I believe a very large majority of churchgoers are merely unthinking, slumbering worshipers of an unknown God.”<sup>18</sup>

Is that you? Then crawl out of your burrow and worship the Living God in the light of divine revelation. We worship the God of creation’s first big-bang moment; we worship the God who shook Sinai with earthquake and smoke; we worship the God who raised Jesus from the dead and poured out the Holy Spirit in the pyrotechnics of Pentecost. We worship the God who still saves sinners like us. Our God is an awesome God before whom the world of tempestuous evil and chaos sits calm and transparent like a great glassy sea. And the surest way to know and hear from this God is to worship each Sunday with the people called *church*. It’s *for you* to be sure, but it’s not *about me or you*. It’s about God!

What do you think people see when they die? They see what John saw. Weekly worship is a dress rehearsal for that awesome moment. Don’t you want to be ready? I do. I want to know the moves and the songs and be able to get with the program. I want to know the names of the cherubim and the seraphim. I want to be able to sing with ox and lion and eagle. I want to recognize the contribution of the cricket, the coo of the dove, and the no-longer-dangerous tambourine of the timber rattler because I listened to them here on earth as the praise of God hidden in creation all around me. “This is my Father’s world, the birds their carols raise, the morning light, the lily white, declare their maker’s praise.”

We worship on behalf of all creation and on behalf of all the creatures from

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<sup>18</sup> *Christianity Today*, Vol. 40, No. 1.

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whom we are separated by language and by custom and by fear, who groan under the awful historical weight of our sin. Go to the zoo in Columbia and exercise the imagination of faith. One day you will converse with a rhino and hear a Bengal tiger sing bass. This is not fantasy but the truest truth. In heaven three of the four most majestic angels present themselves to John's imagination with the faces of the then greatest domestic, non-domestic, and sky creatures: ox, lion, and eagle. The cherubim with a human face is not separated from but placed third among the four. In heaven the barnyard and the henhouse and the big house all get together to praise God. "Ox and ass before him bow, and he is in the manger now. Christ is born today. Christ is born today."

### CONCLUSION

Two items, and then the end. First, did you notice that something is left out of the adoration of the seraphim in verse 8? They sing the same song as Isaiah heard in his vision centuries before. The first line is the same, "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty," but the second line is changed by substitution. Here it is "who was and who is and who is to come," but there it was a bold proclamation that "the whole earth is full of his glory." Why the change? Isaiah heard it because it was *ahead*; John omitted it because it was *not yet*. One day it will be true, so Isaiah is a prophet of hope, but it is not yet true, so John is a prophet of restrained realism. Genuine worship is not a flight from reality but a flight into God so that we may face with courage whatever reality is before us. It is not the opiate of the masses but the balm of Gilead. It is not pie in the sky in the sweet by and by but heavenly food for the tough times here and now. Nothing will make you as intolerant of evil and sin and low living in yourself and others as authentic worship. It is when we have been in God's presence that we begin to see this world and its deeper issues clearly.

Secondly, and this is also easy to miss, while God the Father is to the forefront in these eleven verses, the scene is thoroughly Trinitarian. The voice John hears like a trumpet is the voice of the risen Jesus. The Spirit that carries John in and escorts him around is the Holy Spirit that he sees as seven torches. Later scenes will highlight the worship of the Son and the work of the Spirit. A congregation that learns to worship this Trine God together and that resists the constant temptation to make it *about us* instead of *about God* is kindling for a holy fire. People will come to watch us burn with glory from on high. Will you support this church by your presence in worship? Will you seek God along with us?

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