

Reflections from a United Methodist Pastor

November 22, 2020

Lesson 12

Worship at the Throne

Revelation 4:1-11

After reading Revelation 4:1-11, it becomes clear that human vocabulary falls short when trying to describe the power and glory of God. This is apocalyptic literature, meaning it is written in symbolic language. We could take almost any one of the writer John's images—throne, jasper, carnelian, rainbow, twenty-four, thunder, flames, crystal, lion, fox, human being, eagle, elders—and pour rich and far-reaching meaning into it.

Dreams such as this are not uncommon in the biblical accounts of God's self-revelation. Abimelech had a dream in which God reassured him (Genesis 20:6). Joseph had a series of dreams as God revealed some future to him (Genesis 37:5-11). God spoke to Joseph in a dream to help him understand that Mary's child was from the Holy Spirit (Matthew 1:20). Some time later, the magi were warned in a dream to avoid Herod (Matthew 2:12). Peter reminded his listeners that the prophet Joel had said there would be visions and dreams as God unfolded God's plan (Acts 2:17).

The New Testament word for "heaven" is *ōuranōs*. Sometimes it means the sky. Sometimes it means any great elevation. Sometimes it means the abode of God. First Kings 8:27 reminds us that no matter how we define and shape heaven, God is still greater. No wonder John strained to describe the images that came to him in this trance!

In the midst of all the glorious scenes of heaven, John noted that there was a glass sea, looking like crystal (Revelation 4:6). For some students of the Bible, this sea marks the presence of evil, even in the center of all the praise and worship. [Later, in John's writing, the sea is a reservoir of evil (Revelation 13:1).] But keep in mind what John later noted: When the new heaven and the new earth come into being, the sea (evil) is no more (Revelation 21:1). God has won!

Ultimately, this text is about how the worship of God crosses the boundaries of time and understanding. Four living creatures (maybe the whole created order—Revelation 4:9) worship God. Twenty-four elders (perhaps standing for faithful believers—Revelation 4:10) throw down their crowns (human recognition) and say that only God is worthy. What crown do I need to throw down?

Prayer: As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord."

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