

For Whom Do We Sing?
Rev. 4: 6-11; 5:6-14
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Northminster Presbyterian Church

Yesterday morning in front of the Cielo Vista Walmart a group of people gathered around three young men....two had guitars, one had a cell phone with the lyrics on it...and they began...just the lilting rise and fall of traditional folk guitar...and then....one of the three began to sing...in a mournful tone...in Spanish....

It was a Corrido...in Mexican tradition, the Corrido is a ballad of heroes, a story song to celebrate a life...that needs to be remembered...

"Listen closely," the opening stanza begins....
"In the United States,
In the city of El Paso, Texas,
Many people are crying,
For what has happened here."

The song proceeds to tell the story of last Saturday for several stanzas...and concludes...

"He tried to break my people, but he did not succeed, Now we are more united, thanks be to God..."

We've talked about this before...it's hardwired into us...We humans sing our pain....we sing our joy...so should we be surprised....

By the angels at the birth of Jesus...
Miriam, the sister of Moses, when all the Israelites have made it across the sea from Pharaoh safely...
King David at the return of the Ark of the Covenant from being taken by enemies...
The disciples after the last supper in the upper room...
Paul and Silas in prison, potentially facing death...
And now, in the court of heaven...

What's the one thing they all have in common...other than they were praising God?

The one thing they have in common is singing...

Does that strike you as a bit odd in this text today? Nobody says anything...not one character, creature, angel....none of them speaks a single word...they only sing...

It's almost as if in the presence of God...the only proper response is to sing...that the homage that needs to be paid can't be done with the spoken word...

Perhaps, if that's the case, maybe I should just sit down, and we can have a hymn sing...

But bear with me...

Let's step back for a little context here...

Revelation has opened with John's introduction of the idea of the looming and mysterious confrontation between earthly power and divine power that John envisions happening someplace between our now and God's then...

He then moves through a section of specific admonitions to the seven churches he's writing to, and now he turns to the first extended vision...John as a witness in the heavenly court...an image he borrows liberally from Daniel and Ezekiel in the Old Testament...Where God is enthroned...with these four creatures around the throne...four creatures who will play a major role later on...four creatures who many scholars suggest represent the highest order of eternal creation...the closest beings to God in the cosmos...those with the greatest vision...the greatest insight, second only to God...and they choose as their purpose to praise God...to do nothing more...It's not that God creates them to worship Her...but that as the greatest creatures of the cosmos they, better than any other, can see the depth and breadth of God's greatness...and are inspired by that to sing God's praise. Not speak it...not proclaim it, but to sing it...

And when the creatures sing, the 24 elders...which most people think of as symbols of the earthly powers...earthly kings and kingdoms can't help but sing as well....and throw their crowns at God's feet...

And suddenly, this vision is starting to be extra uncomfortable for the people who probably first heard and read this letter...

For the song the Elders sing and their actions...it's almost as if they are mimicking what Rome requires of the vassal leaders in their kingdoms....The kings or rulers from places like Ethiopia and Palestine and Damascus...come before Caesar...and offer their loyalty...even offering their symbols of power...cloaks and crowns and such....Clearly John is saying something about God and Rome here...and it should be making the Emperor just a bit nervous...

But back to the royal court...In the part I skipped, John introduces the scroll with the seven seals...This scroll is, many agree, the very meaning of Humanity's existence...it is the source of every answer to the hows and whys of every aspect of our earthly existence from the beginning of time to the end of it...And those answers can only blossom into reality if someone can break the seals and read it...

But there is none who are worthy...and John weeps because the seals must remain in place, the ultimate truth cannot happen...until...

Until the Lamb appears...

For us it is very obvious that Jesus is the Lamb, because we've grown up with this image of the Lamb who was slain, yet who lives....where do you think that image comes from? It's there one time in Mark, twice in Luke, twice in John's gospel, once in Acts, twice in Paul's letters....and 28 times in Revelation.

Only the Lamb can break the seals...can truly be the source of all that truth coming to fruition...

And the realization of that leads to....

More singing...

But this time...John has three distinct visions of singing...

—one song at the throne by the 4 creatures and the 24 elders...disclosing that the Lamb is the only one who can break the seals...

—then another song by the gathered angels...and legions of believers...all singing about what the Lamb being the seal-breaker means...that great liturgical listing... “worthy is the Lamb...to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!”

And finally there is one more song...and this time, it is sung by all...by every creature...not just heavenly creatures...not just believers and the faithful...ALL...they sing a simple song of praise to God and to the Lamb...wait...to God and to the Lamb, I will sing, I will sing, to God and to the Lamb I will sing...

John has done something a bit tricky with his first vision...he’s broken the rule of every storyteller by giving away the ending...

Oh yes, the seals must still be broken, and there is much of the vision left to be unpacked...and then a bunch more visions...but the last song is the dead giveaway...

We know how the story is going to end...and it ends with God and the Lamb in all their glory...which means...all other powers...are not...going to prevail...

John’s first vision is a challenge...to those of his time...and ours...

What are you worshipping? he asks his Roman oppressed churches in Asia Minor...

Do you sing the songs of Caesar, he tacitly inquires....even if it’s just going through the motions? Do you offer him your loyalty in public, even with your fingers crossed behind your back?

And here’s where we are invited to see that singing is not just singing....

For singing is a sign of devotion...when we sing, we give ourselves over to the song...the best singers do...body and soul...we become, in a sense, one with the song and what we are singing of...

I remember once, on a Good Friday service in Houston, we were singing the anthem version of “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross”...it’s one of those that builds and builds through each verse, until the last two lines “Love so

amazing so divine demands my soul, my life, my all." That year, the organ had been redone...and the choir was huge...and in those two lines, something truly mysterious and divine happened....we all talked about it...people still talk about it almost 25 years later...it was an encounter with the divine...for all who sang it, and for all who heard it.

For me, that's what these songs in Revelation are trying to lift up...

What is it that you so love that it demands your soul, your life, your all? What is it that inspires you...to live?

John lifts it up perhaps because he is worried the followers of Jesus are not defining themselves solely by their lives in Christ...some are too interested in accumulating power and influence...some are so afraid of being considered different that they suppress their identities as followers of Jesus of Nazareth....some are busy making their churches the most important place in town...some are so caught up in social justice they've forgotten they aren't a political party...

Wait...when was this written?

John's vision reminds us what is central to our identity is our identity in Christ...that this identity is the bedrock of everything else....I may be a preacher and a singer....you may be an artist....or a mom....or an environmentalist....or a Republican or a Libertarian or a Democrat....you may be a Cubs fan or a Sox fan....a Packers fan or a Bears fan....but none of those things can really define who we are...none of those things can unlock the seven seals...none of those things alone can bring us ultimate truth...

John might be saying those are all evil if they are distractions from your life being a song of praise to God...but I'm not so sure that's what he's saying...

For life is rich and diverse...our experiences and our hopes and dreams and passions and loves and interests...these are all part of what makes us unique...but none of them define who we are...

There's a view of Christians today....that we are boring...that we hide in the cave of the church and don't have "real world interests," or that the church is a country club for the middle class...a place to belong and find community that is just all about us and not about God or gospel or the many challenges that exist outside these walls....some say that we just use the church to push

our political agenda....whether liberal or conservative....and I suppose, sometimes, those criticisms are valid.

But where people miss the point is that when we are at our best, we demonstrate a life that is defined as our praise of our maker, redeemer and friend...

For John, the songs of praise are symbolic of worshipping God not Caesar...for us, our lives are to be the songs...the songs that proclaim where our loyalties lie...our truest, deepest loyalty...defined by the one who made us...the one whose love is, in fact, the source of our every breath, of our every dream. The one who is worthy so that all can be worthy...the one whose victory we sing and we live...

And maybe we don't sing it with melody and harmony every day....but every day, in the priorities we set...in the time we take to love and care, in the world we work for and the justice we sacrifice for...and the peace we, with God, seek to create in our lives and the world....these are all anthems to the Lamb....

Let us...let our lives....sing on to eternity....

Thanks be to God...Amen.