

“Worthy of Worship”

Responsive Reading, “A New Song”ⁱ

Many of us wear some sort of step counter or activity tracker, and some of these devices have GPS receivers by which to pinpoint our location. The area in which mine seems most often confused is my elevation above sea level, which has to be reset by synchronizing with the GPS satellites in the sky. Pastor Tim talked about the idea of spiritual “reset buttons” last Sunday, and I’m going to continue that general idea this morning.

We calibrate GPS devices by resetting them according to the standards in the sky. We calibrate our definitions of color by resetting them in sunlight or its equivalent. And we reset our lives by calibrating them according to what is truly Real. The idea of “real” reminds me of my favorite scene in one of my favorite children’s books, Margery Williams’ century-old classic, *The Velveteen Rabbit*:

“What is REAL?” asked the rabbit one day, when they were lying side by side. “Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick-out handle?”

“Real isn’t how you’re made,” said the Skin Horse. “It’s a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real.”ⁱⁱ

So what *is* Real? How would you answer that question? I submit to you that **Love is Real**, because the Bible tells us that “*God IS Love*” (1 John 4:14). In His compassion, in His teaching, in His healing, and in His other miracles, Jesus showed us what Love looks like. And Jesus showed what Love IS when He gave His own life so that we might live (John 15:13).

Today’s Scripture from Revelation tells us some other things about what Real looks like. When Jesus walked among us on the earth, His glory was veiled for our protection. The disciples and those who met Jesus on earth saw Him in human form, not in His Eternal Being. But the Bible does give us a few glimpses of what Jesus is like beyond the veil of space and time.

These glimpses are given in Jesus’ transfigurationⁱⁱⁱ and in the images we have of Him in John’s Revelation, especially chapters 1, 4, 5, and 19. In the vision recorded in Revelation 5, John “*heard the singing of thousands and millions of angels around the throne and the living beings and the elders. And they sang in a mighty chorus:*

*‘Worthy is the Lamb—the Lamb who was slaughtered.
He is worthy to receive **power** and **riches**
and **wisdom** and **strength**
and **honor** and **glory** and **blessing.**’*

“And then [John] heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea. They also sang:

*‘**Blessing** and **honor** and **glory** and **power**
belong to the one sitting on the throne
and to the Lamb for ever and ever.’*

“And the four living creatures said, ‘**Amen!**’ And the twenty-four elders fell down and worshipped” (Revelation 5:11-14).

John’s vision helps us to see what happens when we encounter the One who is Real: we fall on our faces, and we worship Him. I find myself agreeing with Don McMinn, who wrote that “Worship is the central issue in the universe. It is the hub around which all other concerns revolve. . . . Worship is the zenith of life—it is the ultimate experience, and there is nothing beyond.”^{iv}

John Piper added that “Missions is not the ultimate goal of the church. Worship is. **Missions exists because worship doesn’t.**”^v When this present age is over, and the countless millions of the redeemed fall on their faces before the throne of God, missions will be no more. . . . But worship abides forever.”^{vi}

Our theme this morning—the place we go to and the practice we engage in to reset our lives—**is worship**. That’s what John saw going on in his vision of Heaven’s Throne Room. Every detail of this vision is both interesting and important, but because we don’t have unlimited time, we’re just going to consider a few aspects of this scene this morning.

As John’s gaze fell on the area surrounding God’s Throne, he first became aware of twenty-four “elders” sitting on twenty-four thrones around the Throne of God. Opinions vary about who these elders represent, but since John will later tell us that the names of the Twelve Patriarchs are inscribed on the twelve gates of the Heavenly City,^{vii} and that the names of the Twelve Apostles are inscribed on its twelve foundation stones (Revelation 21:12-14), it seems reasonable to me to say that these twenty-four elders represent the faithful people of God.^{viii}

Between the elders and God’s Throne, John saw four “living creatures” standing at the four points of the compass around the Throne. Although the descriptions differ somewhat, it seems likely that these are the same four “living creatures” we first meet in Ezekiel’s vision of God (cp. Ezekiel 1:1-28), and that they are guardian angels of the sort the Bible calls “cherubim.”^{ix}

As John’s vision continues, he sees a figure who resembles “a slaughtered lamb” standing within the circles of the elders and the cherubim, next to the Throne of God. It is this figure to whom the elders and cherubim sing their “New Song”:^x

***You are worthy** to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slaughtered, and you purchased people for God by your blood **from every tribe and language and people and nation.** ¹⁰ You made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they will reign on the earth (Revelation 5:9-10).*

John recognizes the scars on this Lamb, and, even as Thomas recognized the Risen Christ by the marks on His hands, feet, and side (John 20:27-28), John recognizes this Lamb as Jesus, the One whom John the Baptist proclaimed to be “*the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world*” (John 1:29). Through His death and resurrection, Jesus has created a new situation in the universe, a situation that makes possible our salvation, and so the elders and the cherubim sing “A New Song”!

The elders and the mighty angels fall on their faces before the Lamb of God, and their Song is joined by the shouts of countless thousands of the hosts of heaven, who shout with one voice,

***Worthy is the Lamb** who was slaughtered to receive **power** and **riches** and **wisdom** and **strength** and **honor** and **glory** and **blessing!** (Revelation 5:12).*

After this, every created being in the entire cosmos cries out, “**Blessing and honor and glory and power** be to the One seated on the Throne, and to the Lamb, forever and ever!” The four living creatures said, “**Amen,**” and the elders fell down and worshiped (Revelation 5:13-14).

This heavenly praise comes in three waves. First, there is the praise of the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders, which represents all nature and all the redeemed combining to praise the Lamb. Second, there is the praise of the myriads of angels as all the inhabitants of heaven lift up their voices and their shouts of praise. Finally, John sees every

created being in every part of the universe, to its deepest depth and widest circle and farthest corner, singing praise to the Lamb in an unparalleled fortissimo. The final, ultimate state of the universe is going to be worship.

I don't know about you, but this vision gives me goose bumps every time I read it. This is Jesus, not veiled in human flesh, but the One "*at whose name every knee will bow—in heaven and on earth and under the earth—and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father*" (Philippians 2:10-11).

This is a vision of the One who alone is truly REAL. And it is only in the presence of and in the worship of Him who alone is truly Real that you and I can experience the "reset" that we desperately need every day of our lives on this earth.

As wonder-full as this is, though, I need something a bit more concrete to help me with worship in the here-and-now. Rick Warren helps me with that when he notes that "Worship is bringing pleasure to God. **Anything you do that brings pleasure to God is an act of worship.**"^{xi} I can begin to "get my teeth" into that!

Paul meant something similar to this when he wrote these words to the church in Rome: "*Therefore I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship*" (Romans 12:1). And in Ephesians, Paul wrote that "*We are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do*" (Ephesians 2:10).

Taking all of this together, I suggest to you that **to worship God is to give your life joyfully to those "good works which God prepared in advance for you to do."** Worship is a way of life, not a one-hour meeting each week.

Worship is much larger than what happens in this room. Your whole life is your worship, and what you do in this one hour is either confirmed or confounded by what you do with the other 167 hours of each week. As Rick puts it, "Worship is not a *part* of your life; it *is* your life."^{xii}

In Romans 12:2—the very next verse after "*true and proper worship*," Paul wrote, "*Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.*" Part of what Paul meant by this is that God's purposes in any particular moment or experience are not always apparent to us, and it is only by offering our lives to God day by day, every day, that we begin to understand our lives as God does.

God is doing things in our lives, in our world, and in the universe, that are far beyond our present ability to understand them. In fact, one of the many ways in which God shapes our character is to sometimes ask us to do things that don't make sense to us. As one of many examples that could be cited, the Bible tells us that "*Noah did everything exactly as God had commanded him*" (Genesis 6:22). Building a boat the size of a small aircraft carrier hundreds of miles from the ocean didn't make any sense to Noah, but he did it anyway.

The soldier on the ground seldom understands the grand strategies that will win the war, but it is only by the faithful obedience of that soldier that the Grand Strategy accomplishes its purpose. Rick put it well when he wrote that "God doesn't owe you an explanation or reason for everything he asks you to do. Understanding can wait, but obedience can't. Instant obedience will teach you more about God than a lifetime of Bible discussions. In fact, you will never understand some commands until you obey them first. Obedience unlocks understanding."^{xiii}

"Obedience unlocks understanding." You might want to write that down.

I like the way A. W. Tozer put it: “Those who know Christ at all well come to give Him a blind trust. They do not know what He will feel it right to do, nor what they themselves ought to ask from Him; but they are entirely sure of His interest in them, and His compassion toward them, and His power to carry through what no one else could do for them. And they leave it at that, with the inner peace that only He can give.”^{xiv} The Bible says that “*We need have no fear of someone who loves us perfectly; his perfect love for us eliminates all dread of what he might do to us. If we are afraid, it is for fear of what he might do to us and shows that we are not fully convinced that he really loves us*” (1 John 4:18).

My friends, can you begin to sense the wonder-full freedom that comes from living a life that is truly worship, that is focused on bringing pleasure to God? God has given each of us different things to do in this life. We have differing abilities, differing gifts, and differing passions, but we all have the same vocation: to follow Jesus, to worship Him, and to become like Him.

The problem with “*living sacrifices*,” of course, is that they keep jumping off the altar. The journey of daily-life-as-worship requires a clear initial commitment, but it’s also essential that there be a daily renewal of that commitment. This renewal is often a moment-by-moment kind of thing, and **every one of those re-commitments is an act of worship**.

Jeremiah once went down to the potter’s shop and watched the potter at work. “*The jar [the potter] was making did not turn out as he had hoped, so the potter squashed the jar into a lump of clay and started again*” (Jeremiah 18:4). The problem you and I have is that we’re under no constraint to allow God to shape us. God has given us the freedom to jump off of the potter’s wheel any time we wish. We don’t have to worship *God*. But we do have to worship *something*.

The Good News, my friend, is that, just as the potter squashed the clay and began again, so *God is able to reshape your life, no matter what you’ve done with it so far*. Are you still arguing with God about who’s in charge of your life? Are you still trying to make a kindergarten dish out of your life, or are you offering all that you have and are to the Great Potter, who has great and eternal purposes for your life?

The day will come, my friend, when every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea will sing: “***Blessing and honor and glory and power belong to the one sitting on the throne and to the Lamb forever and ever***” (Revelation 5:13). Do you want to be in that crowd? Then begin preparing for the incredible worship that is to come by offering your life to the Potter today.

It’s time to reset. It’s time to sing a New Song. Wear your helmet.

ⁱ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on January 7, 2018. The first sermon of my 7th year at CBF.

ⁱⁱ Margery Williams, *The Velveteen Rabbit*, 1922.

ⁱⁱⁱ Matthew 17:1-13; Mark 9:1-13; Luke 9:28-36.

^{iv} Don McMinn, *Practice of Praise*, pp. 61-62.

^v That is, humanity was created to worship God, and missionary endeavor exists to lead persons into lives of worship after they have been reborn through God’s Spirit.

^{vi} John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad*, p. 11.

^{vii} These are the twelve sons of Jacob, the founders of the Twelve Tribes of Israel.

^{viii} The elders are mentioned in Revelation 4:4, 10; 5:5-6, 8, 11; 7:11, 13; 11:16; 14:3; and 19:4.

^{ix} The four living creatures are always found near and around the throne and near the Lamb (4:6, 5:6, 14:3). They have six wings, and they are full of eyes (4:6, 8). They are constantly engaged in praising and in worshipping God (4:8, 5:8, 5:14, 7:11, 19:4), and they have other functions and duties to perform.

In Revelation, cherubim invite the dreadful manifestations of the wrath of God to appear upon the scene (6:1, 7). One of them hands over the vials of wrath (15:7).

Cherubim form a canopy over the mercy seat (Exodus 25:18-21). God is frequently pictured as sitting between the cherubim (2 Kings 19:15; Psalm 80:1, 99:1; Isaiah 37:16). God is represented as flying on the cherubim and on the wings of the wind (Psalm 18:12). It is the cherubim who guard the way to the Garden (Genesis 3:24). The cherubim are clearly angelic beings whose place in the heavenly scheme is close to God and who are the guardians of the throne of God.

Although there are significant differences, there can be little doubt that the ancestors of these four creatures are the cherubim in the visions of Ezekiel. The details are similar, but they are arranged differently (see also: Genesis 3:24; Exodus 25:18-20; Numbers 7:89; 1 Samuel 4:4; 2 Kings 19:15; Psalm 80:1, 99:1; Isaiah 37:16; Ezekiel 1:4, 10:1-22.)

^x On the idea of a “new song”: Psalm 33:3, 40:3, 96:1, 98:1, 144:9, 149:1; Isaiah 42:9-10.

Music is prominent in the Apocalypse. Hymns and songs appear in 4:8, 11; 5:9-10, 12, 13; 7:12; 11:17-18; and 15:3-4. These hymns, along with others scattered throughout the New Testament (Luke 1:46-55, 68-79; 2:29-32; Ephesians 5:14; Philippians 2:6-11; 1 Timothy 3:16, 6:15-16; 2 Timothy 2:11-13; and Titus 3:4-7), tell us that the early church was a singing church. The New Testament even contains specific encouragement about singing hymns and songs (1 Corinthians 14:26; Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16).

One of the characteristics of Revelation is that it is the book of new things. There is the **new name** (2:17, 3:12); there is the **new Jerusalem** (3:12, 21:2); there is the **new song** (5:9, 14:3); there are the **new heavens** and the **new earth** (21:1); and there is the great promise that God makes **all things new** (21:5).

Greek has two words for “new.” There is “neos,” which means new in time, but not necessarily in quality or nature. Something that is *neos* is something recently produced, but it may only be a new iteration of something that is been in existence for a long time. On the other hand, “kainos” means new in terms of quality or nature. Something that is *kainos* has not only been recently produced, but nothing like it has ever existed before. Jesus brings into life qualities that have never existed before. He brings **new joy, new thrill, new strength, new peace**..

^{xi} Rick Warren, *What On Earth Am I Here For? The Purpose Driven Life*, expanded edition (Zondervan, 2012), p. 66.

^{xii} Warren, p. 68.

^{xiii} Warren, p. 74.

^{xiv} A. W. Tozer, *The Pursuit of God*.

A New Song

- Leader: ¹ Rejoice in the LORD, you righteous ones; praise from the upright is beautiful. ² Praise the LORD with the lyre; make music to him with a ten-stringed harp. ³ Sing a **new song** to him; play skillfully on the strings, with a joyful shout. ⁴ For the word of the LORD is right, and all his work is trustworthy (Psalm 33:1-4).
- People: ¹ **I waited patiently for the LORD, and he turned to me and heard my cry for help. ² He brought me up from a desolate pit, out of the muddy clay, and set my feet on a rock, making my steps secure. ³ He put a new song in my mouth, a hymn of praise to our God (Psalm 40:1-3).**
- Leader: ¹ Sing a **new song** to the LORD; let the whole earth sing to the LORD. ² Sing to the LORD, bless his name; proclaim his salvation from day to day. ³ Declare his glory among the nations, his wondrous works among all peoples. ⁴ For the LORD is great and is highly praised; he is feared above all gods (Psalm 96:1-4).
- People: ¹ **Sing a new song to the LORD, for he has performed wonders; his right hand and holy arm have won him victory. . . . ⁴ Let the whole earth shout to the LORD; be jubilant, shout for joy, and sing** (Psalm 98:1, 4).
- Leader: ⁶ Then I saw one like a slaughtered lamb standing in the midst of the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders. . . . ⁷ He went and took the scroll out of the right hand of the one seated on the throne. ⁸ When he took the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb. Each one had a harp and golden bowls filled with incense, which are the prayers of the saints. ⁹ And they sang a **new song**:
- People: **You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slaughtered, and you purchased people for God by your blood from every tribe and language and people and nation. ¹⁰ You made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they will reign on the earth.**
- Leader: ¹¹ Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels around the throne, and also of the living creatures and of the elders. Their number was countless thousands, plus thousands of thousands. ¹² They said with a loud voice,
- People: **Worthy is the Lamb who was slaughtered to receive power and riches and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and blessing!**
- Leader: ¹³ I heard every creature in heaven, on earth, under the earth, on the sea, and everything in them say,
- People: **Blessing and honor and glory and power be to the one seated on the throne, and to the Lamb, forever and ever!**
- Leader: ¹⁴ The four living creatures said, "Amen," and the elders fell down and worshiped (Revelation 5:6-14).
- Leader: The Word of God for the People of God.
- People: **Thanks be to God!**