

All Things New: Songs of Holiness
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Exodus 15:1-13, John 6:66-69, Revelation 15

Our final Scripture reading today comes from Revelation 15. May God add His richest blessing to the reading of His perfect, holy, and sacred Word. “I saw in heaven another great and marvelous sign: seven angels with the seven last plagues – last, because with them God's wrath is completed. And I saw what looked like a sea of glass mixed with fire and, standing beside the sea, those who had been victorious over the beast and his image and over the number of his name. They held harps given them by God and sang the song of Moses the servant of God and the song of the Lamb: "Great and marvelous are your deeds, Lord God Almighty. Just and true are your ways, King of the ages. Who will not fear you, O Lord, and bring glory to your name? For you alone are holy. All nations will come and worship before you, for your righteous acts have been revealed." After this I looked and in heaven the temple, that is, the tabernacle of the Testimony, was opened. Out of the temple came the seven angels with the seven plagues. They were dressed in clean, shining linen and wore golden sashes around their chests. Then one of the four living creatures gave to the seven angels seven golden bowls filled with the wrath of God, who lives for ever and ever. And the temple was filled with smoke from the glory of God and from his power, and no one could enter the temple until the seven plagues of the seven angels were completed.”

- Some things in life are incomprehensible. We can't understand:
 - How some movies get made (and movie plots)
 - Why some things become trends (spinners)
 - We have a hard time understanding others on the political spectrum – some thinking safety over economy and constitutional rights, also the thought that God gives us rights, not the constitution
 - Doctors can't understand the virus – why some get so sick and some don't, why so many different variations exist in symptoms
- Our modern world has made us think that everything can be comprehended given enough time and science
 - Modern electrical grid, cars, phones and photos
 - Vaccinations and medical advances
 - Schemes to date the universe and the planets
- Yet what if some things are beyond our ability to comprehend?

- Romans 11:33 – “Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!”
- Ephesians 3:17-18 – “And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge – that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.”
- The uniqueness, the set-apartness, and the utterly incomprehensible perfection and goodness of God are what define holiness.
- Today’s passage makes us once again think about the holiness of God and our proper response to it.
- John sees another great and marvelous sign – the seven angels with the seven last plagues – we are moving into the final section of the book and the final cycle, getting a new lens on the final judgment
- With the final plagues, God’s wrath is completed
 - God’s wrath has an end point; we do not continue to have to contemplate judgment beyond this point
 - Historically, the righteous and the wicked are swept up in the judgments of God – the great prophets like Jeremiah and Ezekiel were not exempt from the wrath of God when He judged Israel and Judah; they were exiled into Babylon
 - Christians died in the great judgment of Jerusalem in 70AD when Rome destroyed the city
 - We suffer the consequences of our universal sin, even once we have been forgiven and redeemed, but it will not last forever
- We see the saints by a glassy sea mixed with fire
 - There are direct parallels here with the Exodus – God leads His people out of Egypt and directs them through the Red Sea
 - The saints have come through the glassy sea that represents baptism; the fire represents the Holy Spirit’s coming upon believers, the baptism of the Holy Spirit; it is the baptized faithful who have the Holy Spirit that overcome all the lures and schemes of the beast
 - This reminds us that baptism is the entry point into the Christian faith. Many American evangelicals (and we’re a part of them) have taught praying a prayer of repentance, belief, and discipleship, but baptism is public admission of faith – the starting point; infant baptism leading to confirmation (public)

- Baptism is recognized as the first sacrament throughout all branches of the Christian faith – obedience to Christ
- Do you want to be a part of the faith? Be baptized; begin your walk across the sea of glass that is faith in Christ
- The saints sing the song of Moses and the song of the Lamb
 - Moses is not Jesus; he’s an ordinary, flawed guy; yet he is a picture of the Savior to come; his song is a prelude to and anticipation of the song of Jesus
- What do they sing about? The works of God that spring from His holiness
 - God does wonders, loves His people, brings justice and wrath upon the guilty, because He is holy – perfection in all ways
 - Holiness belongs to God alone. God has the right to set aside people and creatures and places as holy, as set apart for Him and His purposes, but that holiness is only a derivative of His
 - At the end of the passage come the angels who are given the bowls of God’s wrath – they are dressed in the same way Christ was described in Revelation 1 – what they wear reminds us of God’s perfection and holiness, as God’s messengers following in His ways and echoing His holiness – when they receive the bowls, the glory and power of God lead to the temple being filled with smoke, reminiscent of how God presented Himself to the Israelites as a pillar of wind who would descend upon His holy temple – God’s holiness pictured over and over again God embodies holiness, but His holiness becomes apparent through His actions
 - God embodies holiness, but His holiness becomes apparent through His actions. We understand God’s holiness through His deeds – His love and care for us, His righteous acts, His salvation, His works
 - His unique holiness is also pointed out in God’s eternity – as our passage says, “He lives forever and ever.” We have a start point; God does not.
- First key point to remember: *God’s holiness is beyond our ability to completely understand, and that is good.*
 - We could spend our whole lives studying just the book of Revelation and never get to the bottom of it – think about how many interpretations we’ve heard over the years that affect us; yet none is absolutely right, not even mine

- God Himself is so much higher than us; His thoughts greater; His justice more perfect because He is all-knowing
- We get tripped up because we assume we are the highest form of intelligence in the universe, yet we cannot create – we can reassemble from what already exists, combine, tear apart, restructure, but not create
- Place together all the perfect attributes of God and you still must include His absolute glory, majesty, and power before we get even a glimpse at God’s holiness
- Now this doesn’t lead to anti-intellectualism or a fatalistic acceptance of whatever happens; Scripture constantly records the intellectual wrestling of the brilliant with God; Augustine called this “faith seeking understanding” – we start with faith as the basis, but we never stop seeking understanding; we’re called to love the Lord our God with all our mind, too
- His holiness is what leads us to fear God – to have a deep and abiding respect for what is so much bigger, greater, more wonderful, and more fearsome than us – Ellen MacArthur is a decorated sailor who not only holds some of the women’s speed records for circumnavigating the globe and transatlantic sailing, she also held the world record for single-person non-stop circumnavigation of the globe. She said, “Never in my life before have I experienced such beauty, and fear at the same time.” The unpredictability and uncontrollable nature of the sea, the danger and awesomeness – it’s astounding, but only gives us a glimpse into the nature of God
- Second key point: *repentance and worship are the proper response to God’s holiness.*
 - The song of the Lamb – “Who will not fear you, O Lord, and bring glory to your name? For you alone are holy. All nations will come and worship before you, for your righteous acts have been revealed.”
 - Fear because we have sinned; Isaiah, seeing the Lord, says “Woe is me!” Worship without repentance, without an acknowledgement of sin and turning away, is meaningless
 - In Amos 5, God told the wayward Israelites that He hated their religious feasts and their offerings and their songs that were like noise to Him. Instead, God said, “Let justice roll on like a river and righteousness like a never-failing stream!”
 - Once we have repented, we worship to honor and glorify God

- Let's take a moment to talk about what worship is – can't do it if we don't understand it
- Worship is a response to the character and action of God
- Worship is an active verb – not a noun, not a passive verb – it is something we do
- In Hebrew, many verbs described it – bowing before God in reverence, lifting God up in praise, singing, bringing your sacrifice to the altar, celebrating God, to listen to His Word and its teaching, to work – work done on behalf of God to glorify God intentionally is worship
- Worship is never a performance for our benefit – it is always meant to honor and glorify God as we humble ourselves
- It's why we're still doing our full service with a bulletin each week – it'd be easier to cut out the music, shorten the prayer time, shorten the sermon, remove the responses and confessions
- It is about honoring our Creator and acknowledging our desperate need for Him in our lives
- I love watching a well-done music video, but that's not worship; neither is anything but active participation – even active listening when that is appropriate
- Sing, pray, praise, participate – it is not about how well we sing or how meaningfully we say the words, but that we actively give who we are to God – engage! And that activity doesn't end at 11:45 on Sunday morning!
- It also means worship is not about our preferences – it is about our glorifying Him – find a church with the best understanding of who God is that is serving Him wholeheartedly and worshipping Him in spirit and truth and stick around regardless of whether you love the particular format – our only appropriate critique is whether what we are doing in worship most glorifies Him in spirit and truth – is the worship lifting up what is true, noble, right, admirable, pure, praiseworthy, lovely? Is it genuinely honoring God?
- Let us remember that we are the ones called across the glassy sea, who are brought out of captivity to darkness into God's marvelous light, to experience His incredible, unfathomable love and care. We are the ones called to worship Him with all we have. May we fulfill our destiny even today.