

To Focus on God

Revelation 5:11-14

Sermon by Dan Schrock

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¹¹Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels surrounding the throne and the living creatures and the elders; they numbered myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, ¹²singing with full voice, "Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!" ¹³Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, singing, "To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!" ¹⁴And the four living creatures said, "Amen!" And the elders fell down and worshiped.

I

Every week, Christians gather to worship God. At first glance, these worship services look very different. We might meet in tiny rooms that only hold a handful of people, or in giant church campuses sprawled out over 50-60 acres. We worship in prison chapels, hospital chapels, and nursing home chapels. Our style of worship might be Anglo-Catholic, Pentecostal, or something else. Each week we worship in perhaps thousands of different languages.

For 3 of the next 4 Sundays, Marilyn and I will offer three sermons intended to help us think about worship. Being a biblical people, we will of course try to stay in conversation with the Bible.

II

In general, we Mennonites have not been known for specializing in worship. More often we've been known for specializing in things like cooking, community, and discipleship. When other people talk about Mennonites, they're likely mention our interesting cookbooks and our emphasis on the ethics of discipleship, including our work in peacemaking. They might think about the *More with Less* cookbook, the *Simply in Season* cookbook, the *Fix It and Forget It* series of cookbooks, or books on ethics, like *The Politics of Jesus*.

When it comes to worship, the main thing other people know us for is singing, especially our tradition of four-part singing. Our blue *Hymnal: A Worship Book* was

innovative for organizing songs according to the parts of worship. Beyond singing and creating hymnals, we Mennonites didn't used to craft many resources for worship. One afternoon in about 1990, some other people and I were in the home of Arlene and George Mark in Elkhart for a social call. I was then a new pastor in the Mennonite Church, and during the conversation I lamented that outside of hymns there weren't many Mennonite resources for worship. Arlene took my lament to heart and pulled together a series of worship resources which Herald Press published as *Words for Worship*, in 1996. That was followed thirteen years later by *Words for Worship 2*, edited by Dianne Zaerr Brenneman. In 2005, June Alliman Yoder, Marlene Kropf, and Rebecca Slough released their fine book *Preparing Sunday Dinner*. As a working pastor, I'm happy that we now have a nice array of practical resources—these and others—to use in planning worship. North American Mennonite worship is probably more creative, and more varied, than it was 50 years ago.

III

But what's the purpose of worship? Why do we do it every week?

The book of Revelation offers some clues about this, especially in chapters 4 and 5. The text that _____ read for us a few minutes ago comes from this larger section. In chapters 4 and 5, we find at least 3 insights about the nature of worship.

First, worship focuses on the Triune God—and only on God. This might seem so obvious we don't even have to say it. And yet it's extremely easy to let a worship service veer off into focusing on something else. In the United States, local congregations commonly veer off into the worship of country—sometimes signaled by having a large American flag displayed prominently at the front of the sanctuary. I've visited some congregations where it seemed that people were worshiping America about as much as they were worshiping God, and it made me uncomfortable.

Weddings sometimes get sidetracked into focusing on human beings instead of God. I've attended weddings where I thought the worship service spotlighted the happy couple and left God in the shadows. To be honest, I think Jenny and I made this mistake in our own wedding. A friend of mine who was a professional harpsichordist donated his

music to our wedding. We were very grateful for his gift, but the only place for his harpsichord was in the center of the platform at the front of the sanctuary. His harpsichord was a stunningly beautiful instrument and his playing was superb. Yet his instrument and his music turned a central focus of our wedding. It veered away from God—and we made a mistake.

Funerals and memorial services can do this too. The central focus can fall too much on the dead person and make God secondary. Given the tendency for funerals to eulogize the dead person, some members of this congregation have instructed me to preach Christ at their funeral, and not even to mention them in the sermon. I'm happy to follow these instructions. At my own funeral, I do not want anyone to mention my name in the worship service. Mentioning me during a fellowship meal would be ok, but I want the funeral service itself to focus exclusively on God. Whatever good has happened in my life is because of God. So in the funeral, why not tell the truth and focus on the Source of all good? Focusing on anything else would be a lie.

When it comes to regular Sunday worship services, the Worship Commission here at Berkey wisely suggested a few years ago that we create a transitional time after the end of our worship for things like introducing visitors, making announcements, and so on. The intent is to allow us to focus more carefully on God in worship by separating out some things that are necessary but actually have a different focus. In worship, we focus our emotions, desires, and thoughts on God: Creator, Christ, and Spirit. This in turn feeds our spirits. The spiritual part of us connects to, and is enlarged by, the spiritual nature of God.

Second, worship clarifies our political loyalties. This becomes clear when we recognize some of the political language and symbols in Revelation. Take the thrones for God and the 24 elders. A throne is a political chair for rulers to sit on. It symbolizes power, authority, and honor. Another political clue is that number 24. From a Jewish perspective the number 24 could stand for the sum of the 12 tribes of Israel plus the 12 disciples of Jesus. But many of the original readers of Revelation were probably Greeks and Romans instead of Jews. And from a Greco-Roman perspective, the number 24 could

have had another meaning, especially during the reign of the Roman emperor, Domitian, who perhaps was the reigning emperor when this book was written. Emperor Domitian was the first emperor to have 24 lictors, or armed bodyguards, who surrounded him at all times and partly existed to give him honor and glory. In addition, Emperor Domitian insisted that people greet him with the title “Lord and God”—a title similar to the one that the four living creatures use to address God in 4:8.

This and other evidence strongly implies that Revelation is an anti-imperial book. One of Revelation’s purposes is to assert that God is Lord of the world, not the emperor. God is the only one worthy of our worship. We do not worship emperors, presidents, or prime ministers; countries, ethnic groups, or institutions. Worship clarifies our political loyalties by lifting up God above all else.

Third, worship unites us and creation in praise. This has a part A and a part B. Part A is that worship unites us human beings. In the words of 5:9, the saints of God who gather for worship come from “every tribe and language and people and nation.” In 2013, this is more true than it’s probably been in any previous era of church history. When the book of Revelation was written in the first century, Christians only lived in lands near the Mediterranean Sea. To be sure, the Greco-Roman world had a lot of ethnic diversity, and Christians came from many different ethnic groups. But at that point in history, there were no Christians from what we now call North, Central, and South America, the mid to southern parts of Africa, eastern Asia, or Australia. Now Christians are found in all those places and worship in hundreds of languages. The spiritual practice of worship unites us all in confessional praise.

Part B is that worship unites all of creation. In 5:13, John says he “heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea” join in singing to God. This is a remarkable vision: *every* creature in *every* part of the world unites to sing the praises of God. Warblers, giraffes, apple trees, hammerhead sharks, duck-billed platypuses, truffles, Brown Swiss cows—all of them and each of them join in a universal web of worship.

IV

The single most important source of spiritual food for Christians is worship.¹ Nothing else has such power to nourish our spirits, clarify our loyalties, and shape our peoplehood. When we worship, we are formed as God's people. Often this formation happens in subtle ways, beyond what we can notice. Sometimes we leave a worship service feeling as if nothing much happened. But just because we didn't feel it doesn't mean nothing happened. The Spirit alters us that in ways we may not immediately see. When I eat a carrot, I don't usually feel wowed. But it still nourishes me.

Worship is like that. It has the power to nourish us even when we don't feel much of a change. Little by little, worshipping God feeds and forms our life in Christ.²

¹ Yoder, Kropf, and Slough, *Preparing Sunday Dinner: A Collaborative Approach to Worship and Preaching* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 2005), 22.

² "How Does Worship Shape Us for Life?" www.mpn.net/worship/pdf/HoMW_3.pdf