

Lost in Wonder, Love, and Praise

Revelation 7:9-12

Sermon by Dan Schrock

April 28, 2013

⁹After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. ¹⁰They cried out in a loud voice, saying, "Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!" ¹¹And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, ¹²singing, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen."

I

I was talking a while back with my friend Paul. He told me one morning at dawn he was driving into Goshen for a meeting. Just outside of Goshen the sun started to rise over the horizon, radiating pinks, yellows, and oranges across the landscape. "It was so stunning I had to pull my van over to the side of the road," he said. "After I found a place to park, I just sat there in my seat, gazing at the glorious sunrise. I felt really close to God, as if God was reaching out and touching me. As the song says, I was 'lost in wonder, love, and praise.'"¹

To be lost in wonder, love, and praise is an apt description of what happens in peak moments of worship. In peak moments of worship we're caught up in something bigger than ourselves. It's as if we are momentarily pulled outside of our normal mode of living into an alternate world that overlaps the everyday world we usually live in. Our attention is transfixed on God.

II

The 4th, 5th, and 7th chapters of Revelation envision peak moments of worship in God's heavenly court. As you already know, Revelation is visionary literature, often called apocalyptic literature. It's a style of writing that purports to reveal the true nature of the world. This sort of writing was relatively common in that time and place. The authors of this literature would use metaphors like "being swept up by the Spirit of God," or "seeing

doors of heaven open,” and similar language. The authors’ purpose was to help people imagine the really real, the realities and truths that lie beyond our ordinary awareness.

So in this case, John, the writer of Revelation, offers us an imaginary vision of what worship in the courts of God might look like. His painting of God’s court includes angels, 24 elders, 4 living creatures, and a vast multitude of Christians from “all tribes and peoples and languages” (7:9), who are mesmerized in the act of worshiping God.

What strikes me about the worship in Revelation is how multi-sensory it is. Back in chapters 4 and 5, John evokes most of the 5 senses to describe heavenly worship. He appeals to the sense of sight (which is arguably the most important sense in Revelation), and compares God to precious gems—jasper, carnelian, and emerald (4:3). Worship here is a veritable feast for the eyes, with rainbows, thrones, white robes, flashes of lightening, burning torches, and strange creatures different than any you’ll find on earth (4:4-8). Appealing to the sense of sound, John writes of rumblings and peals of thunder (4:5), music (4:8, 11, 5:9-10), and the song of angels (5:11-13). The sense of touch occurs when the 24 elders bow down before God (4:10). The sense of smell is engaged through burning incense (8:4). In the drama of worship, John even gets to eat (10:10).

Perhaps this multi-sensory engagement is one reason why the worship in Revelation is so mesmerizing. Have you ever watched someone play a video game? Usually the person is mesmerized by the experience, so focused on what they’re doing that nothing else matters. Video games have this power partly because they engage at least 3 of our 5 senses. The sense of seeing is attracted to the colors, shapes, and movement on the screen. The sense of hearing is attracted to the rhythms and sounds of the action. The sense of touch is engaged through the game controller. Video game companies have researched what will hook game players and keep them coming back for more. So in this sense we have to recognize that video games can be highly addictive because the manufacturer has learned how to manipulate us.

There’s a significant difference between video games and worshiping God. Nevertheless video games illustrate what peak moments of worship are like. We are

focused, even entranced, and part of the reason why is because several of our senses are usually engaged.

For much of our history, we Mennonites, like Protestants in general, have primarily engaged our ears in worship. I still hear some Mennonites say that hearing is good enough for them. Give me a good sermon and good music in worship, they plead, and then I'll be satisfied. Well, yes, I sometimes want to reply, but did you know that only 20% of people in the world are mostly engaged through their ears? Hearing words and music is important, but only 1 in 5 people groove on that. It's extremely crucial that we pay attention to the words and music we use in worship. Yet if we want to connect with the other 80% of the population, worship has to do more than tingle our ears.²

Among the 5 senses, the sense of seeing is quite possibly most important in contemporary North American culture. Certainly our culture is highly visual. Think books and newspapers; luminous screens on computers, phones, tablets; videos and movies; commercial signs and billboards. The importance of the visual in worship is why we renovated this sanctuary and why we continue to pay a lot of attention to visual features here in the front. The work Lana Smucker did during Lent was simply outstanding.

However, that's still only 2 of our 5 senses. One of the more recent things we've tried is to light candles as an act of prayer. We do it now on the first Sunday of every month, and as far as the Worship Commission has been able to tell, a lot of you like this. I'm not fully sure why, but I'd guess that it engages our bodies and our sense of touch. We get up out of our chairs, walk, pick up a candle, light it, and stick it in sand. We pray with our bodies. We're realizing that intercessory prayer can be an action. Another aspect of this is the visual dynamic—even after we sit back down in our chairs, we can see the flames continuing to burn, symbolizing our on-going prayers.

Our worship is multi-sensory in other ways. Baptism, anointing with oil, laying on of hands, and communion all engage one or more of our senses. They draw more parts of ourselves up into the worship of God.

III

You probably know from your own experience how easily our senses get dulled. Have you noticed that the first sip of coffee or tea, or the first taste of a mango smoothie, is always the most flavorful? By the time we get to the bottom of the cup, our senses of taste and smell have temporarily grown accustomed to the unique taste of mango. This happens, I think, with each of the 5 senses. If I listen to music for several hours, my ears get tired. If I gaze at paintings in an art museum all afternoon, my eyes get tired.

Which might be why God gave us a whole other set of senses. We have 5 physical senses that all of us know about, but we also have at least 5 spiritual senses that are closely related to our 5 physical senses. We have the physical, outward senses of hearing, seeing, tasting, smelling, and touching; but we also have the spiritual, inward senses of hearing, seeing, tasting, smelling and touching. Let's try some examples.

Last fall I was meeting with one of our spiritual direction groups here at church. We always begin our meetings with about 20 minutes of *lectio divina*, which is a way of praying with scripture. I don't remember what Bible passage we were praying with that night, but I definitely remember what I heard God saying to me near the end of the 20 minutes of silence. It was a command, only 5 words long. That experience was remarkable in many ways, but the feature I want to finger right now is that I did not hear those 5 words with the two physical ears on the side of my head. I'm quite sure no one else in the room heard what I heard. Instead, my inner ears heard the words. This is precisely what that wonderful hymn, "Open, Lord, my inward ear," found at #140 in our blue hymnal, is referring to.

Another example, this one from Psalm 34:8—"O taste and see that Yahweh is good." At one level the psalmist might well be talking about the physical senses of taste and sight; but I think it's equally probable that David, the putative author, is alluding to the inner spiritual senses of taste and sight. He's talking about how we and God can communicate with each other in inner ways.

The Bible has other allusions to our inner spiritual senses. Over the last 2,000 years theologians have puzzled over questions like: How many spiritual senses do we actually

have? How are our inner spiritual senses related to our outer physical senses? The answers aren't fully clear, but it seems clear enough that we humans do in fact have these inner senses, and that when we use them, we have the ability to connect with God in some tremendously powerful ways.³

Our inner spiritual senses get awakened in baptism. This is a great reason to undergo the ritual of baptism. This is one of my own motivations for following Christ. He and the Spirit awaken our inner spiritual senses. We, however, have the responsibility of learning to use those spiritual senses. This is what spiritual disciplines are for. Every form of spiritual discipline that I know about gives us an opportunity to practice our inner senses. It's hard work, yes, and lots of times it seems as though nothing inside of us is happening. But that's partly the point of spiritual practices like worship and hundreds of others: we keep showing up, making ourselves available to God, waiting and watching for God to do whatever God wants to do.

IV

One final question. How do you know when your inner senses are connecting with God? What does that feel like? What happens?

Well, it's usually very brief—a few seconds, a few minutes. It could be a moment when you're singing, and your heart skips a beat. It could be during prayer, when your eyes get teary. It could happen when you see something beautiful or evocative and a doorway in your mind swings open and you sense another Reality on the other side. The moment might occur when someone else lays a hand on you and your skin tingles with grace. It could happen when your mind suddenly becomes a blue sapphire.⁴

I struggle for words here. It's hard to describe these peak moments of worship, and so we have to use metaphorical language. But when the moment comes, the Spirit of the Living God touches and transforms our spiritual selves. These delicious moments are partly why we gather for communal worship: to lose ourselves, however briefly, in God's wonder, love, and praise.

¹ Charles Wesley, “Love divine, all loves excelling” verse 4, in *Hymnal: A Worship Book*, 592.

² Dan Kimball and Lilly Lewin, *Sacred Space: A Hands-On Guide to Creating Multisensory Worship Experiences for Youth Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan/Youth Specialties, 2008), 16.

³ Paul L. Gavrilyuk and Sarah Coakley, eds., *The Spiritual Senses: Perceiving God in Western Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012) offers an initial exploration into the history of theologizing about the spiritual senses, at least in the West.

⁴ This image comes from Evagrius of Pontus (349-399): “When the mind has put off the old self and put on the new one born of grace, then it will see its own state in the time of prayer resembling sapphire the color of heaven. . . .” Douglas E. Christie picks it up this image in his new book, *The Blue Sapphire of the Mind: Notes for a Contemplative Ecology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).