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Revelation 1:9-20

Second Message

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THE VISION THAT LEADS TO WORSHIP

SERIES: THE SEEN AND THE UNSEEN

Why are you here today? I asked that question last week, and I ask it again today. It used to be that “going to church” on a Sunday morning was so deeply ingrained that one did it without thinking. But the sanctity of Sunday has been steadily eroded. Many of you face competing demands upon your time. There are other things you could be doing this morning. Taking your children to one or other of the many events that increasingly are scheduled on Sunday morning. Staying home to recover from a hectic week. Enjoying a day at the beach, or a weekend in the mountains. But you are here. Why? Some of you have come to hear the teaching, for PBCC is known as a teaching church. Some of you have come specifically to hear me teach on the Book of Revelation. Others of you are here because you want to worship.

What is worship? It has been observed that a generation ago people chose a church based on the teaching, but now they choose a church based on the worship. Many of you have strong opinions about worship: too many hymns, too few hymns; too loud, not loud enough; too much drums, not enough drums. Each Sunday throughout the world millions of people leave church commenting about their worship experience—whether or not they had a “good worship experience.”

What is good worship? No topic excites more comment at PBCC than worship. Throughout much of its history, PBC (whether Palo Alto or Cupertino) has devoted most of its energy to teaching. But, at least here at PBCC, times are changing. Over the past few years no topic has been discussed more in staff meetings than worship. It may not look like we know what we are doing, and we would be the first to admit that that’s often how we feel.

Over the past four years I have thought a great deal about the topic of worship. My primary textbook has been the Book of Revelation. Nothing has done more to stimulate my thinking about, and understanding of, worship than this book. How can this be, you ask? Isn’t Revelation all about the Great Tribulation, the Rapture, the Millennium, and Armageddon? No, Revelation is all about worship. More accurately, this book is all about God and about his Christ; about the one seated upon the throne, and the Lamb enthroned beside him. Everyone in the book worships; everyone that is except the Trinity in heaven, Father, Son and Spirit; and the counterfeit trinity on earth, dragon, beast and false prophet. Not everyone worships correctly, but everyone worships. It’s not a question of who are the worshipers and who the non-worshipers, but of who are the true worshipers and who are the false worshipers. It’s the same today. Everyone worships someone or something.

Our text this morning has a lot to teach us about worship, even though you will not find the word “worship” in the text.

I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus, was on the island of Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. On the Lord’s Day I was in the Spirit, and I heard be-

hind me a loud voice like a trumpet, which said: “Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea.” (1:9-11 NIV)

Neither John nor his audience is in a setting we would consider conducive to worship. John is on the island of Patmos, 40 miles from his home town Ephesus. But he continues to identify with those back home, describing himself as their brother and companion. John and his readers share in three things: “the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus.”

They share in the suffering in Jesus. The word translated “suffering” can also be rendered “tribulation.” The Great Tribulation doesn’t lie in the future. The tribulation is now, and it has been now for a long time. The New Testament epistles repeatedly tell us that we should not be surprised at suffering. In the Book of Revelation it will not be until chapter 12 that we are given an explanation for this suffering. The dragon, Satan, rages against God and his people. He cannot harm Christ, and he cannot harm the Church, so the only thing left is to make war against the individual believers. There is nothing that Satan can do that will undo the work of Christ. There is nothing that Satan can do that will undo the Church. But God does allow Satan limited power to attack the saints. In the visible realm, Satan will seem to be victorious over many of these saints, as the beast kills the faithful witnesses.

John and his readers share in the kingdom in Jesus. In Ephesus, Smyrna and Pergamum, temples heralded the kingdom of the beast. It is this kingdom of the beast that is the visible kingdom on earth. But those with faith see that there is another kingdom, for Christ “has made us to be a kingdom...to serve his God and Father” (1:6). John and his readers are citizens of this kingdom; though on earth, they are a colony of this heavenly kingdom. They have been transferred out of the other kingdom, the Satanic kingdom of which the “citizens of the earth” are a colony.

John and his readers share in the patient endurance in Jesus. They are not called to rise up in arms and try to defeat Satan. That would be to play right into Satan’s kingdom. They are called to endure, which is to say, they are called to be faithful. If they are covered by the blood of the Lamb and if they hold fast to the testimony of Jesus, then they will emerge victorious.

John’s share in this suffering and kingdom and endurance is to be in exile on the island of Patmos. He is there “because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus” (1:9). Most probably, the proconsul (governor) of Asia deported him to the small, rocky island of Patmos because of his troublesome insistence that Christ, not Caesar, is Lord. On the Lord’s day John finds himself in the Spirit. Most probably he is caught up into a prophetic trance. Four times this happens (1:10; 4:2; 17:3; 21:10). I consider these four instances to be the main structural indicators, dividing the book into major sections. John is caught up in the Spirit on the Lord’s day and given

the messages to the seven churches (1:10-3:22). He is caught up in the Spirit and taken up into heaven, where he is shown the visions that form the central portion of the book (4:1-16:21). This is followed by two appendices in each of which he is shown a city personified as a woman. He is caught up in the Spirit into a desert where he is shown Babylon the prostitute (17:1-19:10). He is caught up in the Spirit onto a high mountain where he is shown the new Jerusalem, the bride (21:9-22:9). Recognition of this structure is a great help in understanding the book.

In this prophetic trance, John hears a voice instructing him, "Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea" (1:11). These seven churches are located in seven cities of the Roman province of Asia. As we saw last week, they are not the only churches in Asia; the New Testament tells us of churches also in Troas, Colossae, Hierapolis. These seven are listed in the order that a messenger might visit them, traveling clockwise from Ephesus, the port at which he would have disembarked from Patmos.

John wants to see the one who speaks to him thus.

I turned round to see the voice that was speaking to me. And when I turned I saw seven golden lampstands, and among the lampstands was someone "like a son of man," dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash round his chest. His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, and out of his mouth came a sharp double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance. (1:12-16)

When John turns, he sees seven golden lampstands, and someone among them. In the Old Testament, lampstands were placed in both the Tabernacle and the Temple, where they blazed continually in the presence of the Lord. John will be given the meaning of these lampstands later, but for now his attention is focused entirely on the one in the midst of the lampstands. The figure he sees is a composite image, drawn from two texts in the book of Daniel.

He is one "like a son of man," a reference to Daniel 7, where one like a son of man comes into the presence of the Ancient of Days, enthroned in his heavenly throne room. He is given an eternal kingdom in which he has authority, glory and sovereign power. This contrasts with the four earthly kingdoms presented earlier in the chapter. Each of those kingdoms is ruled by a beast; each seems more invincible than its predecessor, yet each passes away. In the end these beastly, earthly kingdoms are replaced by a heavenly kingdom ruled not by a beast, but by a true human. This figure that John sees is the King, the true King who will later be revealed as King of kings and Lord of lords.

But this figure is more than just the son of man. "His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow." In Daniel 7, it is the Ancient of Days whose hair is as white as wool (Dan 7:9). How is it possible for one like a son of man to be given an eternal kingdom? In Daniel 7 that is not clear. But in Revelation we find that it is because the one like the son of man who receives the kingdom is scarcely distinguishable from the Ancient of Days who gives the kingdom.

What of the robe, the sash, the eyes, the feet, and the voice? These refer to a man who appeared to Daniel, "a man dressed in linen, with a belt of the finest gold round his waist. His body was like chrysolite, his face like lightning, his eyes like flaming torches, his arms and legs

like the gleam of burnished bronze, and his voice like the sound of a multitude" (Dan 10:5-6). It becomes clear that this is no ordinary man. Later in the chapter we find that he is superior even to Michael, one of the archangels. Both the man in Daniel 10 and the figure that John sees here in Revelation 1 bear the robe and sash of a priest. But not even Aaron, the first high priest, came close to matching the glorious radiance of these figures. These can be no ordinary priests.

John does not yet know who this figure is. But the effect of the vision is overwhelming.

When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. (1:17a)

John is overcome by the vision of this composite figure. He is undone, and falls down as though dead. This, or similar, has been the automatic response of those who have been confronted with the presence of God. When God revealed himself to Moses in the burning bush, "Moses hid his face, because he was afraid to look on God" (Exod 3:6). Three times Ezekiel fell face down when confronted with the glory of the Lord (Ezek 1:28; 3:22-23; 43:1-3). When Isaiah "saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted," he cried out "Woe is me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty" (Isa 6:5). This is biblical worship.

Both Hebrew and Greek use two different words that are often translated into English as the one word, "worship." One verb means to do obeisance; the other means to serve. English versions are often inconsistent in how they translate these two verbs.

Obeisance is a word that has fallen out of use, but throughout most of human history it has been a behavior understood by most people. When an inferior comes into the presence of a superior, he kneels down, touches his forehead to the ground, and pays homage to the one that he acknowledges as his superior, as the one to whom homage is due. In the Bible the verb often occurs in conjunction with such expressions as "he fell on his face" and "his nose to the ground." In the Bible homage is sometimes paid by one human to another, but most frequently it is given by a human to God. We do not give homage to one who is our equal; we give homage to one who is superior. In the case of God, the gulf is enormous: He is our Creator and we are his creatures.

A. W. Tozer, often called a twentieth-century prophet, had a profound understanding of worship. His last series of sermons was on the topic of worship; they were collected and published as the book, *Whatever Happened to Worship?* Here's what he wrote concerning Isaiah's response to seeing the Holy God:

To Isaiah...the violent contrast between that which is God and that which is not God was such that his very language suffered under the effort to express it. ...the living God, in the space of a short second of time, can reveal Himself to the willing spirit of a man...The man whom God will use must be undone. He must be a man who has seen the King in His beauty.¹

Rudolf Otto, in his classic book, *The Idea of the Holy*, describes the one who is holy as *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, the mystery that causes trembling and fascination.² Because there is such a gulf between us and God, because we are on opposite sides of the Creator/creature divide, God must necessarily be mysterious. We can know him only as he has chosen to reveal himself to us. And this revelation of himself to us is necessarily limited in the interests of our own survival. But it is because God is mysterious that we worship him. If there were no mystery we would not worship. Here's Tozer again:

If there is no wonder, no experience of mystery, our efforts to worship will be futile... I will never bend my knees and say 'Holy, holy, holy' to that which I have been able to decipher and figure out in my own mind! That which I can understand will never bring me to the place of awe. It can never fill me with astonishment or wonder or admiration... In some circles, God has been abridged, reduced, modified, edited, changed and amended until He is no longer the God whom Isaiah saw, high and lifted up.³

But God is also a *mysterium fascinans*, a mystery that fascinates. Though we tremble when confronted with this Holy One who is mysterious, we are also fascinated and drawn to him. In the children's book *The Wind in the Willows*, Mole and Rat experience this mystery that both terrifies and fascinates them when they are confronted with an august Presence:

Then suddenly the Mole felt a great Awe fall upon him, an awe that turned his muscles to water, bowed his head, and rooted his feet to the ground. It was no panic terror—indeed he felt wonderfully at peace and happy—but it was an awe that smote and held him and, without seeing, he knew it could only mean that some august Presence was very, very near. With difficulty he turned to look for his friend, and saw him at his side cowed, stricken, and trembling violently. And still there was utter silence in the populous bird-haunted branches around them; and still the light grew and grew...

"Rat!" he found breath to whisper, shaking. "Are you afraid?"

"Afraid?" murmured the Rat, his eyes shining with unutterable love. "Afraid! Of HIM? O, never, never! And yet—and yet—O, Mole, I am afraid!"

Then the two animals, crouching to the earth, bowed their heads and did worship.⁴

I have said before, and I will keep on saying, that Revelation is a book about worship. Everyone in the book worships, everyone that is except the trinity in heaven and the counterfeit trinity on earth. Throughout the book John is given visions into heaven. There he sees a throne, one seated upon the throne, and the Lamb enthroned beside him. Gathered around this throne are several sets of creatures, all of whom are worshiping the one seated upon the throne and the Lamb. The four living creatures, the twenty-four elders, the angels, the redeemed saints, all fall down and worship (4:10; 5:14; 7:11; 11:16; 19:4). And they all sing songs in response to what they have seen or heard. Revelation is filled with songs, songs being sung in heaven. Since we are a colony of heaven on earth, called to live according to heaven's pattern, we, the redeemed, can join in singing those songs as well.

But on earth most worship the wrong person. They worship the counterfeit. In the Book of Revelation this worship is given to the beast, who sits on the counterfeit throne (13:4, 8; 14:9; 16:2; 19:20). They worship the beast because they have been deceived into doing so by the false prophet (13:12).

Even John is not immune from this tendency to worship the wrong person. Twice he falls down before the interpreting angel to worship him. Twice the interpreting angel tells him, "Do not do it! Worship God!" (19:9; 22:8-9).

Though the "citizens of the earth," the residents of the colony of hell, are facing and worshiping the wrong thing, all must eventually be brought face to face with God. To face God is the destiny of everyone in the book. For some that will be a terrifying destiny; for others it is a glorious destiny. It is terrifying to those upon whom God pours out his judgments; they cry out to the very mountains

and rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits and the throne" (6:16). But for the saints, one of the most glorious features of the new heavens and new earth is that "they will see his face" (22:4). In his sermon, "The Weight of Glory," C. S. Lewis writes,

In the end that face which is the delight or the terror of the universe must be turned upon each of us either with one expression or with the other, either conferring glory inexpressible or inflicting shame that can never be cured or disguised.⁵

The other verb that is often translated "worship" is the verb more frequently translated "serve." This is also the usual Hebrew verb for "work," an idea that to us seems very far removed from worship. And yet we use the word "service" for the assembly of God's people on Sunday. Many worshipers on Sunday follow a liturgy, which means "the work of the people." Here we are gathered for a service. But whom are we serving? Are we serving you so that you can leave having had "a good worship experience"? Are we serving unbelievers, offering a service that will entice them to come to church? In both cases, No! We are here to serve God. All of our lives are to be lived in service to God, for that is our "spiritual worship" (lit. our logical service, Rom 12:1). But on Sundays we assemble together before God as his people to bring him our corporate service. We bring our offerings to him: offerings in the form of praise, prayer, money. We listen to his word, and we take that word from here out into the world. Much that happens on Sunday mornings really falls under the category of service. There is nothing wrong with that. Service started before the Fall and it will continue after the Fall is reversed and Creation is complete. The first human served God in the garden (Gen 2:15). In the New Jerusalem we will serve God (22:3), for Jesus Christ "has made us to be...priests to serve his God and Father" (1:6).

But these two words, service and worship, are not the same, though ideally they do occur together. As we gather each Sunday to bring our service to God, we should ask that God be pleased to reveal himself to us in a way that leaves us floored, either literally or metaphorically. Then we will better be able to serve him.

The vision that John sees had this effect on him: it floored him. But he is not left on the floor. He is floored so that he might be commissioned to service:

Then he placed his right hand on me and said: "Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades.

"Write, therefore, what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later. The mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand and of the seven golden lampstands is this: The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches." (1:17b-20)

This awesome figure, this august Presence, puts his right hand on John and says, "Do not be afraid." This is the most frequent command in Scripture. It has to be repeated so many times because the natural response of humans in the presence of God is to be afraid. He is the *mysterium tremendum*, the mystery that makes us tremble. We are to fear God. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge (Prov 1:7) and of wisdom (Prov 9:10). We are to have a proper measure of reverence of God, the reverence that comes from being aware of the "violent contrast" between us and him. Yet we are not to be terrified of him, for his intentions toward us are kind.

The figure reveals himself to John as the First and the Last, the Living One. This is language used elsewhere for God alone. Three

times in Isaiah God reveals himself as the First and the Last (Isa 41:4; 44:6; 48:12). He is also the Living God (Josh 3:10). The title “First and Last” is a virtual synonym of the title God has already used for himself, “the Alpha and the Omega” (1:8). Who is this one who dare apply to himself titles that are due God alone?

The figure reveals himself further as the one who was dead but is now alive for ever. It is now clear that this is Jesus Christ, already described as the faithful witness, and firstborn from the dead (1:5). Here as throughout Revelation, we find being applied to Jesus language that had been reserved for God alone. Jesus was killed for being a faithful witness. It seemed that he had been conquered. But he emerged the conqueror, victorious over death. He therefore holds the keys of death and Hades. They are not independent powers beyond the control of Christ.

This overwhelming vision serves as John’s commissioning to service. Many of the Old Testament prophets had a similar commissioning. John’s service is to write to the seven churches a description of what he has seen. He does not write them an explanation of what he has seen. If he had done so, the world would have been spared a lot of books. John merely presents his visions. These visions concern both what is now and what will take place later. What is now? True worship is being given in heaven; false worship is being given on earth. What will take place later? The counterfeit objects of worship on earth will be removed together with their worshipers, so that true worship can become universal in a conjoined heaven and earth.

Only now is John given an explanation of the seven stars that Jesus holds in his hand and the seven lampstands among whom he stands. The stars are the angels of the churches. The lampstands are the churches themselves. They are the lights burning in the presence of God. John cannot be present with these churches for which he cares so deeply. But that’s all right, for Jesus stands among them.

What is good worship? When you understand worship as falling down in the presence of the one who is *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, the mystery that causes trembling and fascination, “good worship” seems hopelessly inadequate language. It’s like coming out of the movie theater after watching *Schindler’s List* and saying, “That was a good movie.” If that’s what you say, the movie has had no impact on you. Similarly, if you come out of a service saying, “That was good worship,” you have not really worshiped.

Why are we here this morning? We are here in need of a revelation. We need a vision of God and a vision of ourselves. A “vision of ourselves that will devalue us to the point of total devaluation.”⁶ A vision of God that will overwhelm us, a vision that will provoke both trembling and fascination. And we need the reassurance, “Do not be afraid.” “God has saved us to be worshipers.” It is from the prostrate position that God “can raise us up to worship Him and to praise Him and to witness.”⁷

**The LORD bless you
and keep you;
the LORD make his face shine upon you
and be gracious to you;
the LORD turn his face towards you
and give you peace. (Num 6:24-26)**

1. A. W. Tozer, *Whatever Happened to Worship?* (Camp Hill, Penn.: Christian Publications, 1985), 70, 78.
2. Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1923), chapters 4-6.
3. Tozer, *Whatever Happened*, 85-86.
4. Kenneth Grahame, chapter 7, “The Piper at the Gates of Dawn,” *The Wind in the Willows* (1908).
5. C. S. Lewis, “The Weight of Glory,” in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 34.
6. Tozer, *Whatever Happened*, 78.
7. Tozer, *Whatever Happened*, 78.

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