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 Revelation 19:1-10
 31st Message
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HALLELUJAH!

SERIES: THE SEEN AND THE UNSEEN

Last week our service was shaped around the Magnificat, Mary's song of praise celebrating that in the conception of a child in her womb God had turned the world upside down, not just for her but for his people Israel: he has cast down the proud but exalted the humble.

On this, the second Sunday of Advent, our service is shaped around the Benedictus, Zechariah's song of praise after the birth of his son John:

**"Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel,
 because he has come and has redeemed his people." (Luke 1:68
 NIV)**

Like the Magnificat, this song is named after the first word of its Latin translation, *Benedictus*, "blessed" or "praised."

At Advent and Christmas we read the infancy narratives of Luke's gospel. Here Luke portrays a series of ordinary folk: Zechariah and Elizabeth, Mary, Simeon and Anna, the shepherds. These were the "little people," but they were pious, devout, expectant and longing for God. Luke tells us that they were longing for "the consolation of Israel" and "the redemption of Jerusalem" (2:25, 38). The conception and birth of John and Jesus didn't register highly in news bulletins of the day, but these little people had faith to see these for what they were: the turning point of history. They longed for God and they sang. They sang because God had given them much to sing about, though these events were unheralded by the world at large. Actually we don't know if they sang, but the Church quickly turned their poetic proclamations into song, and has continued to sing them ever since, not just at Christmas but throughout the year. These first two chapters of Luke's gospel have contributed five songs which lie at the heart of Christian liturgy: Ave Maria (1:28,42), the Magnificat (1:46b-55), the Benedictus (1:68-79), the Gloria (2:14) and the Nunc Dimittis (2:29-32).

The other great repository of songs in the New Testament is the Book of Revelation. This may still surprise some of you who see the book only in terms of Armageddon and the millennium. Revelation is the greatest book of worship in the New Testament. The whole book is about worship, both true worship and false worship. Revelation is punctuated by songs: songs being sung in heaven around the throne, around God and the Lamb. The Church on earth has long seen it appropriate to join its voice to this heavenly chorus. Two of the greatest pieces in Handel's *Messiah* are drawn from this book: the Hallelujah Chorus and Worthy is the Lamb which closes the work.

Seven years ago, when I first mentioned in a sermon that Revelation is a book about worship, a book full of songs, several people came up to me after the service, expressing their surprise and asking what the secret was to finding these songs. There is no secret! Admittedly the NASB does a poor job in laying out the text, but all more recent translations lay these songs out as poetry, so they're easy to

find. The most important thing is to read the book as a whole, not just read the "juicy parts."

Reading the book aloud in one go is a profound experience. This is how Revelation was intended to be encountered. The book is a prophetic revelation contained within a letter addressed to seven churches. These seven churches are addressed in the order in which a messenger would have traveled. As he traveled the letter would have been read aloud to each assembled church. The letter conveys a blessing on the one who reads and the one who listens: "Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near" (1:3). The reading here is not silent reading to oneself, but public reading aloud. Reading the whole book aloud to a church gathered for worship would profoundly affect our understanding of the book; it would also be a profound act of worship.

Today we come to the last set of songs in the book. Last week we looked at the fall of Babylon. After describing the lament over Babylon of the kings, merchants and mariners who had profited from her, the heavenly voice had called upon God's people to rejoice:

**"Rejoice over her, O heaven!
 Rejoice, saints and apostles and prophets!
 God has judged her for the way she treated you." (18:20)**

Now John hears that rejoicing: songs of rejoicing over the fall of the harlot Babylon which has cleared the way for the wedding supper of the Lamb.

Our text is in three units: rejoicing over the fall of Babylon (19:1-4), rejoicing in anticipation of the wedding supper of the Lamb (19:5-9), and John's response (19:10).

A. Rejoicing over Babylon (19:1-4)

After this I heard what sounded like the roar of a great multitude in heaven shouting:

**"Hallelujah!
 Salvation and glory and power belong to our God,
 for true and just are his judgments.
 He has condemned the great prostitute
 who corrupted the earth by her adulteries.
 He has avenged on her the blood of his servants."**

And again they shouted:

**"Hallelujah!
 The smoke from her goes up for ever and ever." (Rev 19:1-3)**

The first song that John hears is sung by a great multitude in heaven. He had previously seen this "great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb" (7:9). Wearing white robes and waving palm branches, they sang a similar song:

"Salvation belongs to our God,

**who sits on the throne,
and to the Lamb.” (7:10)**

These are the saints, God’s people. Now they celebrate God’s justice. The exercise of this justice is two-fold: he has condemned the great prostitute and he has avenged the blood of his servants, the saints. The great prostitute is Babylon, the great city, the city of man living away from God. Her sins have been many: in respect to herself, she has been sensuous, self-centered and self-secure; in respect to the world, she has seduced and intoxicated with her adulterous idolatries; in respect to the saints, she has killed them.

In all this, she has corrupted the earth. This is imagery from the time of Noah: because the earth had corrupted or ruined itself God ruined the earth with the Flood (Gen 6:11-13). After the Flood God was under no illusion that mankind would be any better the next time around. “Even though every inclination of his heart is evil from his childhood” (8:21), God bound himself to never again destroy all life with a Flood, and he put his bow in the sky as a sign for himself. Under this protective cover of the rainbow, humanity went about building its city again, living outside God’s presence, ruining the earth. God tolerated this evil while setting about redemption. He called Israel to be his instrument of salvation, but Israel became corrupted as well. He sent his Son, but the Son was killed: his blood was found in the great city. But God vindicated his Son, raising him to life, raising him to glory, and installing him as King. He vindicates his saints, doing to them what he did to his own Son, raising them to life, raising them to heaven. With the fall of the great city he finally avenges the blood of his Son and the blood of his saints.

At the opening of the fifth seal, John had seen the martyrs underneath the altar crying out, “How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?” (6:10). This cry of the martyrs has echoed down through history. With the fall of Babylon, God finally brings justice.

The saints rejoice that Babylon’s smoke goes up eternally. We’ve seen that one of Babylon’s sins is that she thinks herself eternal: “I will continue forever—the eternal queen!” (Isa 47:7). Every manifestation of the great city has thought this way. Rome even called herself the eternal city. But the only thing eternal about her is her judgment.

Because Babylon has ruined the earth, God will ruin her. Because she has frustrated the purposes for which he has made the earth and put people upon it, he will remove her so that he can restore the earth and its people to the purposes he intends for them. In these closing chapters of Revelation we get a picture of this glorious destiny for the earth and for God’s people. God has not made mankind to live apart from him in the city of its own construction. He fells that city so that humanity can live with him in the city of his construction.

The twenty-four elders and the four living creatures fell down and worshiped God, who was seated on the throne. And they cried:

“Amen, Hallelujah!” (19:4)

“Amen, Hallelujah!” respond the 24 elders and the 4 cherubim, as they fall down and worship God. These are both Hebrew words that have been transliterated into Greek, Latin and now English, and are used in liturgical contexts. Hallelujah means “Praise the Lord.” Each of the last five psalms begins and ends with this call, Hallelujah! Praise the Lord! Here in Rev 19:1-8 it is used four times, its only use in the New Testament. Amen is an adverb meaning “surely” from a

verb meaning to be reliable, faithful or true. It is said as a response: “let it be so.” The first four books of the Psalter each ends with the response, “Amen and Amen.” The heavenly court thus voices its approval and affirmation of God’s justice.

B. The Marriage Supper of the Lamb (19:5-9)

Then a voice came from the throne, saying:

**“Praise our God,
all you his servants,
you who fear him,
both small and great!”**

Then I heard what sounded like a great multitude, like the roar of rushing waters and like loud peals of thunder, shouting:

**“Hallelujah!
For our Lord God Almighty reigns.
Let us rejoice and be glad
and give him glory!
For the wedding of the Lamb has come,
and his bride has made herself ready.
Fine linen, bright and clean,
was given her to wear.”**

(Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of the saints.) (19:5-8)

Next a voice from the throne summons all God’s people to praise. In response, the great multitude again sings, this time with such a tremendous voice that it is like the roar of rushing waters or loud peals of thunder. Again they cry out, “Hallelujah!”

Babylon’s feast has been an orgy of intoxicating seduction. Her clients were interested in her only insofar as they could enrich themselves with power and profits. With the harlot removed, now we see the bride. Who is this bride? This is a brief announcement of her later presentation:

I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.” (21:2-3)

The bride is the Holy City, New Jerusalem, the city built by God as a dwelling place for himself and his people. The bride is the Church, the company of God’s people. She is beautifully arrayed in her wedding garments, her righteous deeds. These “righteous acts of the saints” could mean either the righteous acts that the saints themselves have done, or the righteous acts that God has done on behalf of the saints. Perhaps it is deliberately ambiguous: both are certainly true in the theology of Revelation and of the wider New Testament. God’s people are called to behavior consistent with their status as his people. In Revelation this behavior to which we are called is faithful witness to the Lord Jesus Christ. But God has also acted in righteousness towards his people, acquitting and vindicating them. He has done so through the faithful witness of his Son.

God’s people stand robed before him fittingly dressed for her husband, his Son. Both Father and Son love her. The Father has given his Son for her. The Son has given himself for her. The robes she wears have been washed white in his blood.

Then the angel said to me, “Write: ‘Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!’” And he added, “These are the true words of God.” (19:9)

The angel instructs John to write down a beatitude, the fourth of seven in the book: “Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!” It is not that only a select group of Christians are the bride of Christ and the rest are merely observers, as Baptist Bride churches maintain. In John’s mixed metaphor, all God’s people are both bride and wedding guests. Perhaps we could state that the Church is the bride, and the individual believers, who of course comprise the Church, are the wedding guests.

The angel assures John that these words are the true words of God. Which words? Certainly the beatitude he’s just given, but ultimately the whole book consists of words which are faithful and true, the words of God. They testify to the one who is himself called “Faithful and True,” “The Word of God” (19:11, 13).

C. Worship God! (19:10)

At this I fell at his feet to worship him. But he said to me, “Do not do it! I am a fellow servant with you and with your brothers who hold to the testimony of Jesus. Worship God! For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.” (19:10)

John has been so overwhelmed by the visions given him that he falls in worship at the feet of the angel who has been showing him these things. But the angel is merely the messenger not the originator of the message. This book is “The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, who testifies to everything he saw—that is, the word of God and the testimony of Jesus” (1:1-2). John and the angel are both servants of God and Jesus. Both are called to hold to the testimony of Jesus. What is this testimony of Jesus? It could mean either the testimony that Jesus himself bore, or the testimony that his servants bear about him. Both are true in this book. The fundamental testimony is the witness borne by Jesus; he is the faithful witness. For this faithful witness he was put to death in the great city, but vindicated by God. The saints are called to follow in his footsteps as faithful witnesses. In the imagery of Revelation, they, too, will be put to death in the great city, but they, too, will be vindicated by God. Through his faithful witness our Lamb has conquered. Let us follow him.

God, through his Spirit, speaks prophetically to the churches to enable them to bear this witness. These churches are to hear what the Spirit is saying to them. Those who hold to this testimony of Jesus, whether they be angels or humans, will worship aright. “Worship God!” could be taken as a thematic statement for the whole book. That this is of fundamental importance to the book is indicated by its repetition in the last chapter, where John again falls down before the angel in worship and is again told, “Do not do it!...Worship God!” (22:8-9).

D. Reflections on worship

Since this is the last block of songs in the book, it is appropriate here to reflect on Revelation’s portrayal of worship. As I’ve said repeatedly, this book is about worship. I’ll address the topic under three headings: whom do we worship, who worships and what is worship?

1. Whom do we worship? Worship Centers

With just a couple of exceptions, everyone in the book either worships or is worshiped. It’s not a question of whether or not you worship, but whom you worship.

Revelation portrays a great company of worshipers gathered around the throne. On that throne is God and there beside him is the Lamb. There is a fundamental divide between the worshiped and the worshipers. It is fitting that God be worshiped: he is worthy to be worshiped for he has created all things (4:11). It is fitting also that the Lamb be worshiped: he is worthy to be worshiped because he has redeemed a people for God (5:9-10, 12). Revelation has an extraordinarily high Christology. The early Christians were Jewish, with an unshakable belief in monotheism, that only God was worthy of worship. Yet the early church worshiped Jesus without compromising its monotheism. It wouldn’t be until the church councils of the fourth and fifth centuries that this was worked out doctrinally, but here in Revelation we see this high Christology. God and the Lamb are both worshiped, yet God is still one. When John refers to God and the Lamb together he uses a singular verb or pronoun; he never refers to “God and the Lamb” as “them.”

The Spirit in Revelation is not himself worshiped. Though the Creed later stated that the Spirit “with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified,” the Spirit is not worshiped as an independent entity. Rather, he “proceeds from the Father and/through the Son” to lead us into true worship, among other things. Our innate tendency is to do what even John does: to worship the wrong one. But God himself is at work in us, through his Spirit, to direct us away from false objects of worship, to worship him and his Son.

Worship centers us on God and on his Christ.

2. Who worships? Worship Gathers

Revelation depicts great circles of worshipers gathered around the throne. Here are all the heavenly creatures: the four cherubim, the 24 elders, and myriads of angels. As created beings, as creatures, they worship God the creator. They have not themselves been redeemed, but as spectators they nevertheless worship the Redeeming Lamb.

Here too are earthly creatures who have been raised to heaven, the martyred saints. They are both created and redeemed. They worship God as the giver of life, and the Lamb as the giver of new life. This company is described as 144,000 from the twelve tribes of Israel: symbolically it is the full number that God called out as the seed of Abraham (7:4-8). But it is also an innumerable multitude from every nation, tribe, people and language (7:9).

Every nation, language, tribe and tongue has been deceived into worshipping the wrong one. But God is at work plundering this kingdom of Satan’s, to assemble before his throne, as his people, as a bride for his Son, a vast multitude from every nation as the seed of Abraham. When humanity gathered together to build a city and tower at Babel, God responded by calling Abraham, telling him, “I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you...and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you” (Gen 12:2-3). This is the missionary basis of the Bible: God is assembling a multinational crowd as the Bride for his Son, and as his worshipers. As John Piper says, “Missions exists because worship doesn’t”—worship is the goal of missions.¹ We have a story to tell to the nations, calling them to gather around God’s throne.

The Church is a great melting pot of all nations gathered together to worship God and to live a new life. As we gather for worship we do so in the company of countless others throughout the world and throughout time. We started our service by singing *Holy God, We Praise Thy Name*, a setting of the *Te Deum*, a fourth-century Latin poem that expresses this idea:

We praise you, O God (*Te Deum laudamus*), we acclaim you as the Lord;
 all creation worships you, the Father everlasting.
 To you all angels, all the powers of heaven,
 the cherubim and seraphim, sing in endless praise:
 Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might,
 heaven and earth are full of your glory.
 The glorious company of apostles praise you.
 The noble fellowship of prophets praise you.
 The white-robed army of martyrs praise you.
 Throughout the world the holy Church acclaim you.

As we are gathered for worship today, we do so as part of a much larger story, as part of a much larger company of people that stretches throughout time and space, gathered around the throne. Worship gathers us.

3. What is worship? Worship Responds

All worship, whether true or false, is a response. In Revelation the worship around the throne is always responsive to what is seen or heard about God and the Lamb, what is seen or heard about their character and deeds. For us to worship we have to be given something to respond to. We need to be shown the character and deeds of God and of the Lamb. On Sundays we gather to have our vision refreshed and then to respond. This is why I place the bulk of our singing after the sermon: so that we can respond in worship to what we have seen of God and Christ.

What do we say when we respond? Repeatedly we find the same things being said in Revelation: “You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power” (4:11), “Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise” (5:12), “To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!” (5:13), “Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever” (7:12), “Salvation and glory and power belong to our God” (19:1). These terms are used in sets of three, four or seven.

In worship we acknowledge that all power and all glory belong to God and to the Lamb and that salvation is his. But the Church doesn't have a very good track record in holding to this.

In worship we acknowledge that all glory belongs to God. In *King Henry V*, after England's miraculous defeat of the French at Agincourt, Shakespeare has Henry say, “Let there be sung *Non nobis et Te Deum*.” *Non nobis* refers to the opening line of Psalm 115: *Non nobis, Domine, non nobis, sed nomini tuo da gloriam*, “Not to us, O Lord, not to us but to your name be the glory” (Ps 115:1). Kenneth Branagh's film has a beautiful rendition of this.

Unfortunately too often the church and its leaders have acquired glory for themselves, building empires and programs. It is not that God is needy of our praise—that is why we seek glory. We give God the glory because he does everything. Zechariah understood this, as did Mary.

In worship we acknowledge that all power belongs to God. The American church, especially, has this mistaken notion that it needs power: power in all three branches of government. But if the church plays the power game it will either lose because the other side always

has more power, or it will become corrupted. Neither is good. It is good news that the power belongs to God not to us. The church can then stop trying to play the power game, and instead follow the lead of the Lamb.

Pope Benedict created a great stir in his speech at Regensburg University, Germany in September, in his comments about the validity of force in religion. Thirty-eight distinguished Islamic authorities wrote a response: “jihad...means struggle, and specifically struggle in the way of God. This struggle may take many forms, including the use of force.”² Though the Church has a pretty sorry record of using power and force, we are called not to resort to power. All power rests in the hands of God. Instead our weapon is our faithful witness to the Lord Jesus Christ, who was himself the faithful witness to God. We bear testimony to God's redeeming love expressed through his Son. He gave that Son, on whom the world vented all its force. Now he bids all come and know his grace.

One of the most impacting books I've read in the past year is Rodney Stark's *The Rise of Christianity*, subtitled “How the obscure, marginal Jesus Movement became the dominant religious force in the Western world in a few centuries.” The early church had no power; Rome had all the power. But the early church had a powerful weapon. Stark writes,

The simple phrase ‘For God so loved the world...’ would have puzzled an educated pagan. And the notion that the gods care how we treat one another would have been dismissed as patently absurd... the idea that God loves those who love him was entirely new.³

Remarkably, Stark wrote this as an unbelieving sociologist. The church has a powerful weapon: its testimony to the love and grace of God shown in his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. In worship we acknowledge that salvation belongs to God and to the Lamb, and that God saves through his Son, whom the world slew but he raised to life.

In worship we are centered onto God and the Lamb, we gather as his great company of people, and we respond. Finally, in our response to God, we fall down on our faces before him and shut up. This is what we see repeatedly throughout Revelation. Worship is not about singing so that we feel warm and fuzzy. Worship is about having such a vision of God and of his Christ that we ascribe all glory and power to him, and then, overwhelmed in awe and enraptured at God and his Son, we shut up.

Praise be to you, O Lord, the God of Israel, because you have come and have redeemed your people. Sovereign Lord, now dismiss your servants in peace, for our eyes have seen your salvation. (Luke 1:68; 2:29-30 alt.)

1. John Piper, *Let The Nations Be Glad!* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 11. The title is from Ps 67:4.

2. Open Letter to His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI.

3. Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996), 211.