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The National Presbyterian Church

The Good Creation

Revelation 4

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The last book of the Bible is the book of Revelation. This is now the sixth sermon in a series of sermons on that book. Revelation begins with letters written to seven churches. It's a little bit like the rest of the New Testament, where letters are written to churches - real people in real places. Their problems are explored, their challenges are faced, that same thing happens in this book. John who writes this book is a Bishop of Ephesus. He's been in prison now in Patmos, where he writes to that church and other churches that surround Ephesus; he knows them well. He writes on behalf of Christ to these seven churches.

The book begins with an amazing personal encounter that John the author has with Jesus Christ. He turned and he saw Christ and Christ put his hand on his shoulder and said, "Don't be afraid, I'm the living one, the beginning, the middle, the end, *alpha* and *omega*" (Revelation 1:17). And then our Lord gives John this message to write to the seven churches. Now we're at the fourth chapter of the book of Revelation, following the seven letters. "After this I looked and there in heaven a door stood open" (Revelation 4:1). Now begins the rest of the book which will be a vision that John experiences. This vision will dominate all the rest of this book as John shares this amazing encounter. It's going to take your breath away. Listen to it.

The first voice which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet said 'Come up here and I will show you what must take place after this.' At once I was in the Spirit and there in heaven stood a throne and one seated on the throne. [This opening sounds almost exactly like the Book of Isaiah, Chapter 6, "In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord high and lifted up" (Isaiah 6:1). You're going to see some of the same amazing imagery here in this. Also Ezekiel 1 has the same thing with all this tremendous imagery as John now describes it to us.] And the one seated on the throne looked like jasper and carnelian, and around the throne is a rainbow that looks like an emerald. Around the throne are twenty-four thrones, and seated on the thrones are twenty-four elders dressed in white robes with golden crowns on their heads. Coming from the throne are flashes of lightning, rumblings, the peal of thunder, and in front of the throne burns seven flaming torches, which are the seven spirits of God. And in front of the throne there is something like a sea of glass like crystal. (Revelation 4:2-6).

This is amazing imagery and let me offer a word of advice as we look at the imagery in the book of Revelation. A great deal of it will not be interpreted to us. For instance, it's not interpreted to us what are the 24 elders that are seated with crowns. It's not interpreted to us. Some have wondered if this is an allusion to the 24 ranks of Levitical priests. Who knows? It's not mentioned. Words are used that say, "*like a trumpet, like carnelian, like jasper, like a sea of glass.*" The best thing for us to do is to stand back in reverence and in awe before some of this imagery. Don't try to interpret it.

Now some things are going to be very clear and are explained to us. For instance, in the fifth chapter there'll be a reference to incense that's rising that he sees. And there John actually interprets it. He says that the incense he saw is the prayers of the saints down through the ages. Ah, now something is interpreted. But most of the imagery is not interpreted. We're to stand in a kind of wonder in front of it. In fact, my own guideline for Biblical interpretation not only of Revelation but of any book in the New Testament is that the best rule of thumb in interpreting is: lean is better than luxurious. I use that rule of thumb for interpretation. It helps a lot.

Luxurious interpretations have often gotten us in a lot of trouble. In other

words in the book of Revelation, don't look for the European Common Market. Some people have seen the European Common Market in the book of Revelation. Some people have even seen the Procter and Gamble symbol of the half moon in the book of Revelation. Don't do that. Don't look for Russia meeting China in the book of Revelation. We have sometimes baffled serious readers with these kinds of reckless interpretive models. After the year 1000 a number of Christians said that because 1000 is mentioned in the book of Revelation, the world is about to end; and a great number of people sold all their properties and they didn't invest in a meaningful responsibility to the future because the world was going to end at 1000 according to their reading of Revelation. And it didn't. How embarrassing! And then at the end of 2000, some people said the same thing again, again on the basis of Revelation. Don't do that. Stand back in wonder. But, there are things in Revelation that are very, very clear. And you're going to meet one of them right now. These are the songs. The chorales that will be sung in the book of Revelation are crystal clear. They become for each reader very teachable moments. In fact, I believe the great teaching in the book of Revelation resides in the songs that are sung. George Friedrich Handel was correct. He chose the songs from Revelation as the main themes in his *Messiah*, not the imagery as much as the songs. So watch for the songs. We're going to meet one right now that's very important.

What a tremendous scene!

So around the throne on each side of the throne were four living creatures full of eyes in front and behind and the first living creature was like a lion, and the second living creature was like an ox, and the third living creature was like the face of a human, and the fourth living creature was like a flying eagle (Revelation 4:6-7).

What are these four living creatures? We don't know. There is one clue though from a first century rabbinic saying that we have found that says, "the mightiest among the birds is the eagle, the mightiest among the domestic animals is the ox, the mightiest among the wild beasts is the lion, and the mightiest of all is man." This ancient saying is referring to the whole of creation, referring to creation of the Animal Kingdom as the ox, the lion, the eagle, and man. Is that what this is referring to? We don't know. It's not interpreted to us. But notice something does happen here that becomes clear. These creatures, whoever they are, the eagle, the lion, the man, and

the ox, surround “and the four living creatures, each of them with six wings full of eyes around and on inside, and day and night without ceasing they sing” (Revelation 4:8).

And now comes the chorale: “Holy, holy, holy.” We just sang it at the beginning of worship. You heard it in the book of Isaiah Chapter 6, “Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty who was, who is, and who will be” (Revelation 4:8). Now that is perfectly clear. There is nothing that needs to be interpreted there. It’s absolutely clear. There’s nothing beyond understanding there. It’s mysterious but it’s clear. Holy, holy, holy; the word “holy” in the Old Testament and the New Testament always has to do both with the presence of God, and his holy otherness – the fact that he is before creation. He is the Lord of creation, that’s why he’s holy. And that’s sung three times in Isaiah, it’s now sung three times here: “Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty. Who was, who is, and who will be.” He is the Lord of Time. The book of Revelation began with that. God is the one who was, who is, who will be. *Alpha* and *Omega*, the Lord of Time. And whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to the one who is seated on the throne, who lives forever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall before the one who is seated on the throne, and they worship the one who lives forever and ever, and they cast their crowns. The word is *diadem* that is used here, that’s kingly crowns, the crowns of authority, they cast their authority, their crowns before the throne singing. And now the rest of the carol; listen to this chorale. “You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power for you created all things and by your will [that means “decision” and your will is a very powerful word in the New Testament and Old Testament. And by your will, by your decision they existed and were created. The word for creation there is the Greek word from which we get the English word “existence”] they were created.” They exist by your decision; it’s a song to God the Creator. The Creator of everything.

That’s perfectly clear. There’s nothing opaque, nothing hidden here. We know exactly what this song is singing. Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, you’re the Lord of all time, and by your will all things were made and exist by your decision. You’re worthy therefore. The word *axious* is used there for “worthy;” it means you deserve this honor because you are the author of everything. What a song! The song reminds us of John 1, the Gospel of John. “In the beginning was the Word, [the speech] the Word is with God, all things were made through him, without him was not any-

thing made that was made" (John 1:1-3). That's how John begins his gospel. It sounds a lot like Genesis 1: "In the beginning God said ... and there was light;" in the beginning God created it and called it good (Genesis 1:3). He told us what he thought of what he created: he called it good. We're getting the same thing now in this great song that begins the book of Revelation.

I need to show you something though, you need to see that this song in Revelation Chapter 4, is on a collision course with what is a predominant theme in Greek philosophy in the time of the first century. We need to know this; some 400 years before Christ, Plato wrote *The Republic*. And Plato set the whole stage for what would be one of the main philosophical perspectives toward the world in which we live, in Western thought. Plato said that there's a fundamental distinction, between what he called appearance and reality.¹ For instance this table, this pulpit, this marble is not real. It's an appearance. The reality is the idea behind the table. Now that's very appealing, especially to a certain spiritual instinct and it's had a very big effect on Western thought. That's Platonism, that this reality is the idea, and the concrete reality we see around us is not necessarily real. It is therefore inferior. All that is concrete is made more unreal and in Platonism there is a kind of downgrading of the created world. And this text that you've just heard runs completely cross grain to that. That is not what this text is saying. This song is not saying that the great realities are the great spiritual realities; and that the physical reality, your body, your sexual nature, your physical nature, male, female, this building, Antarctica, the world, bugs and all the other things in the world are inferior. What is superior is the spirit and the idea; and that spiritualism of reality has its roots in Platonism.

This text is totally different. This song portrays what is in fact the Judeo-Christian understanding of creation, and of the whole concrete nature of this actual world in which we live which includes our spiritual nature and our physical nature together. And that will mark the understanding that the Bible affirms, both Old and New Testament: that is the Biblical understanding of who we are and the world that we live in. The song of Chapter 4 is in a collision course with what the Greeks believed. This means that the whole of existence, physical, spiritual, is by God's decision. His truth stands underneath everything according to this great song. Notice he's worthy because his decision undergirds everything in the created order.

This becomes the basis for science. Platonism doesn't produce good science.

It spiritualizes you; that's why the Greeks never came up with an adequate view of sex. Because they didn't see it as meaningful. It's only the spirit and ideas that are meaningful. But the Judeo-Christian understanding of your body takes your body seriously and sees you as a real being which has worth and dignity, and meaning. And therefore science can do experiments and can count on the reliability of the created order, so that we can send someone to the moon and using Newton's calculus we can figure out how to get the person back from the moon, and if he made the right intersection into our space and into our ozone layer and into our atmospheric layer, if he didn't come in too fast he wouldn't burn up and he could bring a space ship back into this earth; and because of the reliability of the created order we were able to do it because the earth was dependable. Physics and science was dependable because God undergirds it and gives meaning to all of the created order, physical and spiritual too.

That is the far reaching significance of this Judeo-Christian understanding of the created order. Therefore here and now where we live in the 24-hour cycle of our lives we don't try to escape from this world into a phantom world. But the way this text gets you ready for what the Christians will encounter in the second century is Gnosticism. Gnosticism is basically half-baked Greek philosophy trying to take over Christianity. And what they said was that the world was created by an inferior God, and for their gospel now the superior God, and they wanted Jesus to be that superior God, who was not really a man, he was a phantom man. He didn't really die on the cross he only appeared to die on the cross because he's too great for that. He's pure spirit. And that pure spirit will help you get away from the world and escape the 24-hour cycles of living in the world. That became the Gnostic hope. They favored immortality of the soul. But the Christian hope is the resurrection of the body. It's the real you who has meaning. This world has meaning. Everything has meaning.

Therefore we don't want to escape out of the world, we want to make sense of the world. Jesus Christ is not a phantom. He's a real man. He really died on the cross and you're not a phantom either. You're a real person. That is the marvelous song that begins the book of Revelation. Even with the first century the early church is going to face a temptation; Gnosticism is going to deny that Christ was really physical. That is why in the book of II John, John writes, "Beware of those who say that Christ didn't come in the flesh.

That's false. He did come in the flesh" (II John 1:7).

Can I tell you something? In 1982, I wrote a book about the book of Revelation. I was invited by Lloyd Ogilvie to write a commentary in a series of commentaries that were being published then by Thomas Nelson. They're still in print. I was asked by Lloyd to write a commentary on I, II & III John and Revelation in 1982. Louis Evans was in this church as our pastor then and he wrote the commentary on the book of Hebrews. Let me read to you what I wrote in 1982. It's interesting in light of the time we're living in now 27 years later.

"John's vision is the vision of the goodness of creation because of its good design and origin. It is by God's decision and the world was created, and though the world is in crisis, as indeed this book of Revelation will confirm, (after all Nero is the Emperor when John writes this book) nevertheless the good decision of God stands immovable. God's vision honors God for the whole created order with the salute of "well done." John means that however tragic the world and its particular parts may be, the prior fact is this: each part of the whole is in no sense an accident of playful gods, (which you see in Greek mythology.) Or the bad joke of a cynical deity. The creation of the world is the good act of the one Holy God." And by the way this north transept of our window in this sanctuary is the book of Revelation window. And notice if you look closely you can make out the rainbow that goes across this whole window. That's from Revelation Chapter 4, which we just saw. And the window says, 'nothing can separate us from the decision God made to love us,' from Romans Chapter 8. This is a grand window. Someone pointed out to me today there are many, many little sheep in this window to show that the created order is beloved by God. The whole created order; that's the north transept window of these marvelous windows in our church.

And then I also wrote this, "As a result of this first chorale, we knew that the Christians' faith in the God who has will for creation will produce an ethics that must care deeply about the earth, about harvest, about labor management relationships, about the care of animals, about the meaning of our sexual nature, about ecology, about prisoners, about widows, about unborn children, about neglected children, about all the details of being truly human."² As a result of the first chorale, we know that redemption when it happens to us by the grace of God, and we'll see that next week when we

meet the Lamb, that redemption when it happens to us in the midst of our lives, by the grace of God, will not remove us out of the 24-hour cycle within which we live our lives, but will forgive, and enable, and offer compassion to us in the midst of the days, the months, the years that exist, by the will of God. God's will, his awesome decision is the beginning point for every other fact about life and living. And that's how the book of Revelation begins. Next week we meet the Redeemer, the Lamb.

Heavenly Father, thank you that this book begins with this amazing song to the Creator, that you're the One, to whom we sing "Holy, Holy, Holy," you're the One who made us; you called it good. We live in crisis because this world is in crisis, but nothing can separate us from the decision you made to love us when you made us. We thank you for that. This book is a book of hope because of that song. Now may we live in it ourselves. In Christ's name we pray, Amen.

1 Plato. *The Republic*. 380 B.C.

2 Palmer, Earl F. *The Communicator's Commentary: 1, 2, 3 John, Revelation*. Thomas Nelson, 1982. pgs. 162-163.

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Sunday Worship at 8, 9:15 & 11 a.m.
Classes for Adults, Youth, and Children at 9:15 a.m.

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