

Some Revelations

Revelation 5:11-13, 7:9-12 ¹¹ Then I looked, and I heard the sound of many angels surrounding the throne, the living creatures, and the elders. They numbered in the millions--thousands upon thousands.

¹² They said in a loud voice, "Worthy is the slaughtered Lamb to receive power, wealth, wisdom, and might, and honor, glory, and blessing." ¹³ And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea--I heard everything everywhere say, "Blessing, honor, glory, and power belong to the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb forever and always."

⁹ After this I looked, and there was a great crowd that no one could number. They were from every nation, tribe, people, and language. They were standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They wore white robes and held palm branches in their hands. ¹⁰ They cried out with a loud voice: "Victory belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb." ¹¹ All the angels stood in a circle around the throne, and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell facedown before the throne and worshipped God, ¹² saying, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and always. Amen."

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Someone once remarked that you don't realize how many pregnant women there are - until your wife is pregnant, and then it seems like you see pregnant women everywhere! Becoming aware of some condition or circumstance sensitizes you notice it whenever you run across it. After you buy a car, you're more likely to take note of others of the same make and model. When your child enters high school, you pay more attention to teenagers, their issues, and their activities. And sometimes all of this leads you to detect generalizations that seem to apply. Wow! It seems like a lot of sports cars are red. Or, denim must not be as durable as it used to be because it seems like everybody's jeans have holes in them.

Walter Brueggemann, one of today's most respected Old Testament scholars, talks about trajectories in scripture. By this he means those overarching themes that are common in the Bible, and that bind the Bible stories together so that we can get our minds around them. In the past few weeks, I've been struck by a consistent message in scripture. It's not like I wasn't aware of this before, but that the powerful insistence of this theme occurs more frequently and with greater strength than I had ever noticed. God initiates good things. God makes the first move. The creation story tells us that it was God's idea for there to be a beautiful world with gorgeous forests, splendid mountains, and plants and animals to provide food, clothing, and shelter. It isn't just a matter of God providing for our physical needs, however. For many of us, the creative artistry of creation provides a window for some understanding of God. Michelangelo said, "My soul can find no staircase to heaven unless it be through Earth's loveliness."

As we studied the patriarchs these past few months, we saw how God approached, not the notable or the powerful, but those who were unknown, the younger sons, and those whose failings were as large as their faithfulness to God. In the family dynamics of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob we saw dysfunction on a huge scale. And yet, God reached out to these people, warts and all. We say that they were called by God, and so they were, but we need to be careful about how we understand that. Abraham was told that he and his descendants were called to be a blessing to all nations. They weren't called to privilege, but to service. They weren't the exclusive elite, the few saved from the fate of the many, but those given the task of spreading the news of a loving God who cared for all of creation, especially all people. When we think of ourselves as chosen or elect, there's always the temptation to be proud and exclusive instead of humbly grateful and inclusive.

Over and over, God makes the first move, and it's to the underdog and the undeserving. A felon on the run who worked as a common sheep herder, a man named Moses, was sent back to Egypt to

rescue a bunch of worthless sub-humans at the bottom of the barrel, some Hebrew slaves. At another time, God infused wisdom and strength into a woman, of all things! – And, Deborah led her people in throwing off their oppressors. In fact, in the adult education class in recent months, we've seen how, in a patriarchal society, God often empowered lowly women to do powerful things.

God chose a young, simple shepherd boy to become the best king that Israel ever had. The fiery prophets who both comforted and challenged the people of Israel were often nobodies raised up from obscurity. Amos was a simple shepherd and a tree trimmer. Hosea had a troubled marriage to a prostitute. Would you select the guy on the yard crew or the fellow with the habitually unfaithful wife to be a spokesperson for God?

Over and over again, the most unlikely people are chosen. But the focus isn't on their individual salvation or rescue, but on their being chosen to serve God's good purposes – and it all happens at God's initiative.

In the New Testament, a baby born to a peasant family becomes a wandering rabbi who preaches hope, love, forgiveness, compassion, and a message of God's mercy and care for the very least. And Jesus spends his time with those who are undeserving, the bottom-feeders of the world. His disciples are a motley group of nobodies – fishermen, tax collectors, and who knows what else.

After his death and resurrection, that ragtag bunch of unworthy disciples began to tell the story and perform acts of kindness in Christ's name. Guided by the Holy Spirit, they did it with the most unlikely people – an officer of the hated Roman army named Cornelius, a castrated Black man from a foreign country to the south, a man who had dedicated himself to rounding up the followers of Jesus and putting them into prison – a man named Saul, and people who weren't part of the chosen people of Israel, but were instead the despicable unholy heathens, the great mass of unwashed pagans, the disgusting folks known as gentiles.

Our inclination is to want to be in the chosen, the proud and the few, as we're likely to picture it. We want to be amongst the select, the saved, deserving righteous. Oddly though, God keeps initiating good things and reaching out to the least, the poor, those who keep stumbling, the outsiders, the undeserving, the unworthy nobodies and the undeserving sinners.

As I backed off and thought over much of what we've studied together over the past several months, these overarching, often recurring themes became clearer revelations in my mind. Scripture is not so much about us begging for God's attention as it is about how it's God's nature to shower us with good and love. There's less about God's pouring favor on the exclusive few who succeed at purity in belief and devotion, and much more about God's attention to the impure and the unworthy. And there is very little about a tiny exclusive group approved by God because of their heritage, their gender, or the narrowness of their belief, and a tremendous amount of welcoming of diversity without regard to all of our favorite ways of classifying, sorting, and excluding people.

And so we come to today's passages from the book of Revelation. If you are looking for salvation of and celebration by the few, while the sinful hordes scream in torment below, you won't find it here in today's passages. John writes that celebrating and cheering and singing praise to God and to the Lamb is a jubilant crowd beyond counting – millions of millions, myriads of myriads, ten thousand times ten thousand, thousands of thousands! This isn't the select few, but the welcomed many. This is that same loving attention and welcome that has been God's way of doing things all through history. And so here we see what we've seen all along, the great love and compassion that is beyond all imagination, in heaven as it was on earth.

John writes that the human diversity is only part of the celebration. It includes every creature in heaven – the angels, cherubim, and seraphim. And you remember how God declared all the animals of the earth, and the sea, and the sky to be good? Well, here they are! John writes, "I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea--I heard everything everywhere say, "Blessing, honor, glory, and power belong to the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb forever and always." I don't know how you can get much more inclusive than that!

With our small-mindedness, we want to sort people into categories and define people by race, economics, education, government structure, political posture, ethnic heritage, and on and on the list goes. Then we want to stack all of these in some order, with only the top tip – which naturally includes us - reaching into heaven, and the great bulk of this pyramid squatting in hell because they just weren't as good as us. But God seeks out the lowly and undeserving and with no good reason except for her love and good pleasure has always given an overwhelming abundance of love to the unworthy.

We argue on church billboard signs about whether dogs go to heaven. John tells us we will be singing with whales and squid, with mocking birds and screech owls, with coyotes and mules. So perhaps we would do well to spend less time drawing the circle around the saved, for after all, that is God's job, not ours, and spend more time learning how to sing and live in harmony with not only our fellow humans, but also our fellow creatures. Now's the time to practice our parts for that great-massed chorus in praise of our God. Amen.

Sisters and Brothers,

The readiness of God to love, to forgive, and to reconcile us to himself

Is beyond belief – but believe it anyway!

Start practicing to sing in the massed choir of heaven,

Remembering that you never know who may be holding the other half of the hymnal!