

Revelation 7 – On Earth As It Is In Heaven
A Sermon by Sonny Gallman
Central Baptist Church, May 25, 2019

My church history professor ruined me on the Orthodox church. His description of worship in the Orthodox Church was such a beautiful theological image of worship, I just know that the real thing will never compare, and so I have never worshipped in an Orthodox church.

What I know is that in each Orthodox church, there is a dome of some sort, and in that dome is a picture of Jesus reigning in heaven, with his hands in a certain pose called the pantocrator, which means God almighty, or Lord of Hosts. In that depiction, the risen and reigning, almighty Jesus is surrounded by the community of faith throughout time and space. He is holding the new testament in one hand, and holding his hand up in this pose, offering his blessing on Creation.

(Photo 1)

And around the dome, holding it up, stretching from floor to the rim of the dome, are twelve pillars, representing the 12 disciples. In many orthodox sanctuaries, there is an actual depiction of the disciple's face on the pillar or just above it.

And the worship in an orthodox church is broken up into parts. At different parts of the service, a portion of the people will get up, without prompting, and walk out of the sanctuary and go and hang out in the narthex, and then they will come back in later in the worship.

The priest will perform several of the worship's functions or elements, including the preparation of the Lord's supper, behind a wall or a curtain.

Everything in the worship is designed to communicate some important theological truths:

The first is that worship and faith are veiled in mystery. By keeping certain parts of worship behind the wall, they are preserving the mystery of the Holy. That sense of mystery invites worshippers to allow faith and worship to be experienced, not explained. And all of it is presided over by a God who blesses.

Second, the symbols of worship in the orthodox church convey that we are participating in something that is on-going, and has been on-going throughout time. The saints are there, the apostles are there. So worship is not something that starts every Sunday at 10:45 and ends at 11:45 or 12, and then re-starts next Sunday at 10:45. Instead their worship is designed to communicate that worship is an eternal, on-going experience that started before time and will continue into eternity.

Third, the symbols of an orthodox sanctuary communicate that the worship that is taking place here on earth is a mirror or reflection (even if it is imperfect) of the worship that is taking place in heaven. So it is not like heaven is waiting for the last believer to die so that the real, eternal worship can start; worship is already taking place in heaven, and we are joining in.

I tell you that because I believe that it is a beautiful image of worship. And I also tell you that, because this passage that we just read gives us a very important picture of the worship that is taking place in heaven.

And finally, I tell you that, because I believe that when we worship at Central Baptist Church, or any other place that we worship, it should reflect the worship that John of Patmos saw when he saw the heavens opened, and caught a glimpse of heavenly worship. I believe that this need, this call, is something that is true for the church universal.

So what I want to do today is point out some of the characteristics that I see in John's description of the heavenly worship service, and I want to talk to you about some of the ways that I see that Central is indeed mirroring that kind of worship, and some ways that we still have bridges to build and barriers to take down, so that we can better reflect it.

And then in closing, I want to present to you a mission statement that the deacons, the church council and I have been working on for the last few months. It is a mission statement that I think creates a space in our shared spirituality, our community, to reflect that heavenly worship scene we just read about.

When I read this passage, what I first noticed was the size and scope of the crowd around the throne. It was so large that no one could count. Even though John had just given the number of 144,000 for those in heaven, here he says that the number was too great to count.

And when he describes the crowd, in a seemingly repeated fashion, we are told that there are people from every nation, tribe, people, and language gathered around the throne.

Photo 2

Now I want you to ponder that for just a second: every nation, every tribe, every people, every language. That kind of repetition and hyperbole is used in scripture, usually to make an important point. When Peter asks Jesus just how many times he has to forgive someone, he offers up the possible answer of 7, thinking that forgiving someone 7 times would be pretty incredible. Jesus' response is to say not just seven times, but seventy times seven to indicate that our forgiving should model the kind of infinite forgiving that God offers to humanity.

When the risen Christ is speaking to the disciples about their future ministry, he tells them that they will be his witnesses, in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. Well, when you think (like they did in that age) that the world is flat, and that Jerusalem, and in particular, the Temple, is the center of the world, the end of the world takes you out to the very corners of the world, in geography and in thought and worldview. Hyperbole, but the meaning is that the gospel will be heard and experienced in the most remote, seemingly unworthy places and people in the world. And it comes to fruition in the baptism of the Ethiopian Eunuch someone about as different, geographically and in worldview as you could get, and yet in God's eyes, a human being that like all other human beings, was a child of God.

So back to our passage, when we read that around the throne will be people from every nation, every tribe, every people, and every language, that is hyperbole; but the implication is that those present at the throne will go beyond the nations or people groups that we can name, and especially more than we are comfortable with.

The next thing that I noticed is the acclamation of the angels, the four creatures and the elders that are gathered around the throne. It is not just a song of praise that they are singing. It is a song praising God for God's wisdom. The sense is that God is correct and just in bringing all these people to the throne. This was certainly not the work of humans in choosing those at the throne.

For we have proven over and over again that, when left to our own devices, we are pretty good at shutting people out and saying heaven is not for you, or the heaven that I experience is not for you to experience. But in this passage, God has shown that those whom God has drawn to the throne will be there. And the elders and the creature and the angels are praising God for it.

The next thing that I noticed was the elder questioning John who these people are. John, who has clearly found his humility in the incredible sight before him, says, "Sir, you are the one that knows." He then proceeds to tell him that these are people who have made it through the great ordeal. In the reading of Revelation, in chapter 6, the people of the great ordeal are people who have survived the opening of the seven seals.

When you read that chapter, it is revealed these are people who have dealt with the oppression of work, they have dealt with famine and hunger, they have dealt with peace being pulled from under them, they have dealt with and survived the crushing blow of persecution. These are people who have endured all the evils that the world can hurl at them: prejudice, injustice, oppression; and they have survived.

Like those in the civil rights movement; like those in the suffragette movement, like those who have been in the middle of religious wars, all claiming to know the truth of God, like those who endured slavery, those who endured abuse. All of those who have suffered at the hand of evil in the world. They have made it through the great ordeal, and they are gathered for worship.

I have been reading a book by an African American scholar named Luke Powery, called *Dem Dry Bones*. He spends a good bit of time in his book talking about the Negro Spirituals, and how in the midst of great struggle, and great oppression, their great ordeal, they were longing for the day when they could, in freedom, worship the Lord.

All of us, when we gather in church on Sunday morning, in one way or another have made it through our version of the great ordeal, whether it is a tough week at work, a marriage mired in abuse and argument, brothers and sisters that won't leave us alone, a life blocked by the heavy weight of grief, a body that is struggling with the reality of older age, the loneliness and depression that seem to be a signature of this era or technology, or a people group struggling with persecution or oppression.

We have all come through the great ordeal, what Luke Powery calls our “little deaths,” and we have gathered at the throne of the Lamb. We, like those who endure the 7 seals in Revelation 6, have been on a journey, that has brought us to this place of hope and our cloaks, like theirs, are marred with the blood and mud of their ordeal, and in the wisdom of God, their garments have been washed clean. They can now worship.

In this passage, they have gathered in their washed-clean white garments, and in worship, we have gathered in our washed-clean white garments, regardless of the nature of the ordeal we have walked through, regardless of the suffering we have experienced.

One more important thought about this image of eternal worship in Revelation. Despite their white garments, despite the cleanness with which they now worship, John is able to tell that they are gathered from all of these nations, and tribes, these people and languages. So they have not been made into a homogenous, “everyone looks and acts like another”, throng. While they share in the grace of having their clothes washed and their troubles washed away, they still maintain their identities as people of different groups.

Photo 3

And not only that, we are told that, in their diversity, gathered together in God’s temple, they will sing in worship together, day and night.

In other words, they will not be kept silent. They will not be told that because of the nature of their nation, or people group, or identity, they will have to remain silent. They will sing. They will express their gifts and their talents, and they will celebrate their common arrival point, and their very different paths.

And in their singing, God will heal them, God will wipe the tears from their eyes.

Now I don’t know about you, but I get chills up and down my spine, when I think of that vision becoming a reality.

When I think about the beautiful, theologically sound image of the Orthodox church, of us joining every Sunday to participate in the eternal, everlasting worship of God, that is a humbling, awe-filled thought in and of itself. What we do on Sundays, from our speaking, singing, and praying, to our listening and responding, all of it is sacred, and not to be taken lightly.

And then, when I join that thought with the unifying, diversity-celebrating, and healing worship that is described in Revelation 7, what I feel is that we have a challenge. A challenge, as we pray every Sunday, for God’s Kingdom, God’s reign to come, here on earth as it is in heaven.

I believe that we have a challenge for us to do everything in our power to make and create a worship so that the characteristics of worship in heaven become the characteristics of our worship.

And the good news is that, by and large, we have a worship that does. We have a community that does. I was on the phone with two different prominent businessmen in the area this week, and both of them told me that as a church, we are already the most welcoming church in the area, making room for people of all nations and tribes and languages.

And I have heard that many times over my years here at Central. "You have so much going for you at that church, its just that no one knows about it."

Over the course of time, we have been and we are a church that welcomes people who are coming out of the great ordeal.

We have counseling services for those who are struggling in their emotional, professional, and relational lives, to not only welcome them, but to celebrate the gifts that they bring to our church.

We have welcomed women who were told or thought as children that they must be mishearing their call to ministry, because they thought ministry was not for women. But here their gifts have been celebrated.

We have welcomed alcoholics and drug addicts who were coming out of the great ordeal and beginning, with starts and stops, the recovery process, and we have let them sing with their talents.

All through our history, we have mirrored and reflected the words of Hal Marchman, who said, and I quote, "when other churches and people tell you that there is not a place at the table of the Lord for you, Jesus says there is."

But the truth of our world, which we are discovering in every discipline, from science to language to astronomy to theology to culture to technology, is that the process of discovery is never over. Like Star Trek in fiction, and science in real life tells us, there are always new frontiers. And the same is true when it comes to discovering nations, tribes, peoples and languages.

There are some groups who are not completely freed of their ordeal. There are other groups who have not yet been given a hand, lifting them out of the ordeal, and there are others that we simply have not yet recognized. And just as worship in heaven is ongoing, but not yet complete until all are gathered around the throne, our worship, our welcome, is not yet complete until we commit to the journey of welcoming all who want to experience the healing, unifying, compassionate presence of the lamb.

And so, in conjunction with the deacons and the church council, I am asking this church to embrace a mission statement that expresses this call to a journey where we actively seek out and welcome all people to the journey of faith in Jesus Christ.

Here is our proposed mission statement:

Central chooses to unconditionally welcome and affirm all people to the journey of faith in Jesus Christ.

And I want you to know what I mean when I propose that mission statement: I believe that God welcomes all people, rich and poor, healthy and disabled, educated and uneducated, male and female, gay and straight, black and white, those who are certain in their faith and those who are just exploring, traditional families, single-parent families, mixed race families. I believe that God welcomes all of these people, and other groups that might be left out to the throne of God. For it is there, as Revelation tells us, that all of our mud, crud, and blood are washed and cleaned, and it is there, in all of our variety, that we sing.

Photo 4, 5

This is the kind of worship that I see, when we begin to embrace this kind of inclusive vision.

And while we are still working with the wording on them, next week in worship, I will be proposing to you some clarifying statements about what we believe, and what we seek to do, that the deacons and church council would like the church to affirm.

Next Sunday morning, during the Sunday School hour, I invite anyone here, or any who you think need to be here to a time of flushing all this out in terms of the biblical and ethical ramifications. My dad, Lee Gallman, who holds a PhD and more than 40 years as a senior pastor, and Jim Shoopman, who also holds a PhD, is our chairman of the deacon body, and teaches ethics at Embry Riddle, will each make some comments, and then open the floor for your questions.

Some of you may be asking, "why now?" This process started in February, when I heard on the radio one morning when I was bringing Isabel to school that the United Methodist Church, and I have lots of Methodist friends, had decided to continue and strengthen its policy, where by bishops are punished for ordaining clergy who identified as Gay or Lesbian, and where by clergy would be punished who performed same-sex marriages.

I thought about the agony that those who lost that vote by a margin of 53 to 47 percent must be going through. And I thought about my brother, who many of you know has chosen against faith, partly because he was not welcomed by the churches he attended. And I wanted to write a letter to the newspaper, that day, saying that if there were any pilgrims from that vote who felt that they had lost their community of faith, that Central was open and could provide them a home. But a wise person once told me to always sleep on your letters, so I slept on it. What stopped me was that I am a pastor of a church, and when I speak, I don't just speak for myself, I speak for my church. And I wanted this church to have an opportunity to affirm what I feel has always been true of us.

We are a church that welcomes people to the journey of faith that God has put them on. We have welcomed so many people, from the homeless to the wealthy, who because of their life circumstances, needed a community of faith to welcome them and give them a home to worship and serve in.

And when it comes to a community of faith that searches for new tribes and nations, new peoples and languages to welcome to the throne, if not here, then where? If not now, when? If not us, then who? And if to not tell people who we are and what our vision is, then how?

I hope that you will accept this invitation to a journey, of becoming the best version of ourselves that we can be. Let us pray.

(end)