

Epworth Chapel on the Green  
May 12<sup>th</sup>, 2019, Fourth Sunday of Easter  
The Right Response  
Rev. John Crow

Acts 9:36-43  
Psalm 100:1-4  
Revelation 7:9-17  
John 10:22-30

What would your response be to unexpectedly seeing your best friend at a social gathering where you didn't know anybody else? How would you respond to a complete stranger at the park who asked you to watch her purse for a second while she run after her toddler who is running towards the parking lot? How do you respond when your doorbell rings at dinner time, and it's someone trying to sell new windows? We all respond to different people in different situations throughout our lives, typically without thinking about it. Some times we are delighted. Other times we are surprised. And some times we are just plain annoyed. Of course, we often cause others to respond to us, and you may not get the response we are hoping for—especially if you are a door-to-door salesman.

It goes without saying that we also respond to God. Sometimes our response is the proper one, and sometimes it isn't. Our reading today from the Book of Revelation is a scene in the throne room of God Almighty, where all living things are

responding to the Lord. But a lot has happened already in this last letter of John, so I think I need to do a quick review before we explore this scene. The book starts with his admonition and encouragement to the seven churches of Asia Minor, or modern-day Turkey. After that, the book shifts to its discourse on the 3 sets of sevens: seven seals, seven trumpets, and seven bowls. I'm sure you all know that seven is a highly symbolic number in the Bible, representing the number of completeness. Not surprisingly then, the number seven represents God, who is the only truly complete being in existence.

Seals one through six have already been broken on the scroll, unleashing various judgments on Creation, but then there is a pause in the action before the seventh seal. That's where we find ourselves today. And this pause is important because the destruction was so devastating by the time the sixth seal was broken, that those living rhetorically ask, "who can stand?" This is known as the day of God's wrath. Sounds pretty desperate. And it raises a question: Is God a god of wrath? I'm sure many children who are being punished have wondered in the moment if they have a parent of wrath.

In this pause the narrative leaves Earth behind, where all mankind is living in fear and suffering, and takes us to the Kingdom of Heaven, where the scene is a polar opposite. No one is in fear. No one is suffering. We see only one activity: the praise of God. And the praise specifically applies to the Lamb who was slain, which is an image of Christ introduced in last week's reading in Revelation 5, which took place before any of the seals on the scroll were broken. You might not be surprised that there are precisely seven words of praise that the assembly offers to God. "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God for ever and ever! Amen" (7:12). Five of these words remind us of God's true nature, which tells us that wrath is not God's primary attribute. There are then two words of praise that remind us of our proper response to God.

We will actually start with the third word on the list, "*sofia*," which translates as *wisdom*. Certainly, if God isn't wise, then who is? Because God is wise, we can rest in the fact that he uses His awesome power in the best way possible to achieve His ends. A leader may get his subordinates to obey through ridicule and threats, but I think we would all agree that doing so isn't the best way possible. God's plans are wise, and even our sinful nature can't thwart them. Now, knowledge isn't one of the seven words in this particular list, but we know nothing is beyond

God's knowledge, so He isn't like us, trying to make wise decisions with limited knowledge. Personally, I find this very reassuring.

The next four words on the list are two sets of praise words. *Doxa* and *timay* (*glory* and *honor*) appear as a pair in reference to God eleven times in the New Testament. *Doonamis* and *iswhoos* (*power* and *might*) do not commonly appear together, but they mean essentially the same thing. The Greek word we translate as *honor* emphasizes the esteem one inherently possesses in and of themselves. As humans, we have the honor that God gave to all of us, which is the honor of being made in His image and declared good; but there is also the honor that we earn through right behavior. God's honor, however, is entirely His, simply as a result of God being God. Now, if that wasn't enough, God has clearly earned honor through His various saving activities on behalf of mankind throughout history. This is particularly the case in this scene, where the Lamb is receiving honor.

Glory is slightly different than honor, in that in the Greek it emphasizes position. Yahweh has glory because He is God. However, I don't want to split hairs on the finer points between glory and honor. Glory and honor are God's to a higher degree than they ever could be for any of us. And whereas our behavior and our

position changes throughout our lives, God's does not, so the permanence of His glory and honor make these attributes even greater. God will never have any less glory than He has now. What is unusual, however, about honor and glory is that unlike most other attributes, like wisdom, power, and might, these are not descriptions of God that necessarily help us trust God more, or feel safe in His hands. They don't do the opposite either; they just are. Knowing that God has unending glory doesn't mean nearly so much to me as the knowledge that He is good, loving, patient, merciful, or wise. I might feel differently when I meet God face-to-face, and can experience His glory firsthand, but I guess we'll just have to wait and see.

As I mentioned earlier, the Greek words we translate as *power* and *might* don't have any distinguishable difference. I look at this duplication as a form of exuberance on the part of the worshippers. They are caught up in the moment, praising God in His very throne room. I think in a moment like that, the words would just spill out of us. The praise is primordial—it comes straight from the heart because the head can't even comprehend what is happening. So let's not try to do violence to the text by unnecessarily dissecting what we see and hear in this scene.

Power and might are important attributes because they reassure us that God has the ability to accomplish all that He sets out to do. It would be fine and dandy if God was knowledgeable and wise, but if He were not powerful as well, then it would be possible that Satan could defeat Him. Can you imagine that? The cosmic struggle between good and evil is exciting in novels, where there is a lingering possibility that good will not triumph over evil. That prospect is not so exciting in real life. In fact, it would be nothing short of terrifying. We needn't worry, however, because God's power and might assure us that He will bring to pass everything that the last 2 chapters of Revelation lay out for us—where humanity and Creation will be redeemed and be better off than they were before the Fall.

Now that we have looked more closely at the inherent attributes that God's audience are praising Him for, there are still two left that are different from the rest. The last two are a proper response expressed to God by others. The first word to appear in our list is "*yoologia*", which the RSV translates as *blessing*, though most scholars translate it as *praise*. One doesn't receive praise unless there is someone else to do the praising. We already know that God is worthy of praise, and the angels have been praising God from the very beginning, but we too were

created for praise. Just the fact that there is a list of words praising God in today's reading demonstrates our God-given proclivity to praise. I am tempted to say we have a duty to praise, but the word *duty* gives the wrong connotation. We praise God as a natural overflow of our joy and awe at His greatness, as I mentioned earlier. So praise could never be mere duty, since it is for us as much as it is for God. Just as a baby naturally smiles when his mom walks in the room, so we too will naturally offer God our praise when we are in His presence.

And praise should naturally lead to something else: telling others. How many times have you found a great new restaurant, or tv show, or book, you name it, that you thought was so good, you had to tell others? I've done it countless times. You would think I was on commission! Why do we do that? Because we naturally tell others about things that we think will give them the same joy it gives us. So why are we hesitant to tell others about Jesus? Is it because we don't think others will be as inspired as we are? Maybe. Or maybe it's because the praise just isn't bubbling up within us to begin with. Either way, we are impeding what should be as natural as sharing your favorite recipe, but with far greater consequences.

The last word in our list (“*yoowharistia*”) translates to *thanksgiving*, which is also a response from us towards God. One obviously doesn’t have gratitude towards themselves—at least not a healthy, rational person. One does not receive gratitude unless someone else is thankful for what they have done. The thanksgiving this verse mentions clearly requires us. Just like with praise, thanksgiving is our right and natural response to God for who He is and what He has done for us. If in our fallen state we can feel gratitude towards God, how much more will we feel it and express it when we are in God’s presence?!

Like praise, thanksgiving also naturally results in something else: generosity. When we are properly thankful to God, it encompasses not just gratitude for our salvation, but for every good thing we have. All of it is a gift. Therefore, all of it can be shared with others. If you believe you have personally earned all you have through toil and sweat, then it’s harder to be generous. But when you realize that God gave it to you, so it’s not really yours to begin with, well it’s quite easy to give it away. There is no reason to believe that God is going to stop being generous with you now—especially when He challenges us to just try and out-give Him. And I believe that just like with His Word, God will ensure that generosity in the name of the Kingdom always bears fruit.

As we prepare to come to the table today, to share in the feast of the lamb that was slain for our sakes, I think we should pause for a moment and reflect on the fact that God's wrath stems from His love for His children. What parent isn't angered when someone threatens the well-being of their child? And what threatens us most is sin in all its forms, so of course God will intervene to protect us. Therefore, I'd say that God's wrath is a secondary trait—a necessary corollary to His primary traits. It is important that we believe this, or we may lose trust in God's goodness. Why obey a God who doesn't have our best interest at heart? We must settle this question before we can get any further.

Next, in preparing our hearts for communion, we should ask ourselves, am I giving God the right and proper response for who He is and all that He has done? Do I give Him praise and thanksgiving? What about giving Him my time in service, or in reading Scripture? Do I give him back the financial resources necessary to help those in need and further the work of the Kingdom? Do I give Him my very self, by nurturing my relationship as His adopted child, through time spent in prayer, worship, and meditation? Is there obedience to the guiding of the Holy Spirit that you are ignoring? Maybe you feel called to perform some kind of ministry, but

you are resisting? This moment is the perfect time to both reflect on your response to God, and bring to Him any doubts, fears, or confusion you are feeling. Don't hold anything back—you can be honest with God. The Eucharist reminds us of the overwhelming love of our Great Shepherd—Jesus Christ. He is patient and He will be with us every step of the way. So as today's Psalm encourages us, let us come boldly into the presence of God, as our right response to who He is: a god not of wrath, but of praise and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.