



**Gathered in the Spirit
Revelation 4
November 2, 2018
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When people ask me what the Book of Revelation means, I give an answer they don't expect. I say to them, "It is a book of worship."

The Apostle John has a vision from God. In this chapter, heaven opens up, and he witnesses this glorious worship service going on in heaven. It is beautiful. Esther read only a portion of this worship service. I invite you to read the rest of it when you get home: Revelation 4 and extends into chapter 5.

I believe one of the reasons why we worship God together in a worship service is that we are practicing what is happening in heaven. I believe we catch a glimpse of heaven when we worship together.

However, sometimes we tend to approach worship as if it is about us, not God. I give this illustration in the New Member class (in fact, there is one going on right now. You will meet them in a couple weeks). We tend to approach worship like a theatre. You are the audience, and those of us up on the stage or platform are here to entertain you, to meet your needs.

But, the word for liturgy means the "work of the people." Worship is the work of all of us as we gather together to praise, honor and glorify God. We come here for God. All of this is for God. A worship service is our acts of service for God.

If we approach worship in this way – as our work for God – then you are not the audience being entertained by us; rather God becomes the audience as you act before God. You are here to interact with God. We, up front, help by giving you

suggestions in your interaction with God. We suggest songs to sing. We give you some prayers to say to God. We help you understand the scriptures. We give you an opportunity to give out of your riches to God.

All of this, so you can worship God. Then, as you interact with God, you are nourished and fed by God. God fills us with the joy of knowing we are loved. God restores us through forgiveness. God provides the Word for spiritual hungry hearts. God fills us with the bread and fruit of new life in Christ. God gives you peace and joy and a purpose as you walk out the doors after the service.

Worship is the natural response to the presence and mystery of God. True worship is responding to that presence and who God is with our entire being. As our passage says, “You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and praise.” That is what we do when we come here.

However, being human, we sometimes find worship frustrating rather than fulfilling. Boring rather than beautiful. Passive rather than participatory. Perhaps you don’t like the hymns that are sung on a particular day, or the scripture passage is meaningless and the sermon boring. You “come for living water and leave with unquenched thirst. [You] come to be nourished and leave with a mouthful of sand.” (from *Soul Feast* by Marjorie Thompson)

Here is what I want to do for you today – to help you “to become lively actors in the drama of human worship before God.” No matter how much you dislike the hymns or the sermon that day, I want to give you some advice that will help you leave the worship service with a wondrous experience with God. And believe me, I am talking to myself as well.

First, preparation. Inward preparation. I know you love to come here and talk with your brothers and sisters in Christ. That is wonderful. But when you sit down in the sanctuary, begin to prepare your heart for worshipping God. We give you a prayer of preparation to settle your hearts and mine to worship. Did you read it today?

Let's do so now. As I read it, notice what sticks with you, whether it is one word, or a phrase or a sentence. "How do we even begin to express in words who you are and what you have done? Your holiness is beyond our comprehension, your worth beyond all price. And yet, you have chosen to invite us into your story and to call us your children. Our prayer today is that our worship will bring you great, great glory. Amen."

I like to pray the Prayer of Preparation during the Prelude. I roll it over in my mind and pay attention to what speaks to me, and carry it forward into the worship service.

Preparation happens during the week, too. Maybe you have a favorite devotional you read daily. If you don't have one, we give them out free at the Information Table in the Fellowship Hall.

We have started placing daily spiritual encouragements on our Facebook page. Even if you are not on Facebook, you can read these encouragements of spiritual nurture and challenge. Go to the church's website, and click on the little "F" in the upper right hand corner, and it will take you directly to our Facebook page. Read the spiritual encouragement that day and dwell on it for a bit.

Here are some samples of spiritual encouragement on our Facebook page from this week:

- No act of kindness, no matter how small, is ever wasted.
- Pray with expectation
- I am a work in progress

I have given you some advice on how to prepare for worship. Here's what you can do throughout the worship service, ways to heighten your awareness of God's presence in this place.

Be prepared to hear God speak. Recognize that God can get your attention in *any* part of the worship service. Pay attention to the meaning of the words in printed prayers, in the liturgy, in the anthem.

Listen or read the words of the hymns with an ear for meaning. If you don't know the hymn, pay attention to the words. They allow us to express depths of joy and praise and sorrow and thought in ways we can't do on our own.

For example, you may not know the last hymn we are singing today. It is an Easter Song. The chorus is "Alleluia, Alleluia, Give thanks to the risen Lord." If you don't know this song, dwell on the words "Give thanks to the Risen Lord." Give thanks to the Lord for something specific, right then and there.

As we sing the congregational response after the blessing, perhaps you are unhappy because we are not singing our usual song, "Let There Be Peace on Earth." If that is the case, pay attention to the words of the song we will sing: "Because he lives I can face tomorrow." Are you facing something this week that fills you with fear? Listen to the hope in this song: "God holds the future," and carry that thought out with you.

Sometimes we will give you a time of silence, particularly in confession. Take that time to listen. Or, take that time to offer God your heart.

If you are distracted in the service by a hearing aid going off, or a cell phone. Instead of getting angry, pray for that person. Pray for people in the world who cannot afford hearing aids or cell phones.

If you are bored during the sermon or you are not getting anything out of it, admit it to God. Maybe look around, pick out a particular person and pray for that person. I remember the story of Joni Earickson, a popular author who is a quadriplegic. She will choose the head of someone sitting in front of her and pray for that person. She did that one day with a man sitting in front of her. He eventually became her husband! I mean, you never know.

If other parts of the service do not speak to you, stay focused on the parts that do. Ponder the phrase or insight or tune. Perhaps that is the one thing God is giving you that day.

Focus on the use of your body in worship. I like to open my hands facing upward when we pray. It makes me feel open to what God is giving me. By opening my hands, I am saying to God: I give you myself, and I receive what you are offering.

Maybe the hymn is especially uplifting and wonderful to you. Show it in your body. Maybe lift up your hand in praise – whether to your chest, your shoulder, or full blown all the way up. Scripture says, “Lift up yours in the sanctuary and praise the Lord” (Psalm 134:2) It’s amazing how that can lift your heart.

Look for the different symbols in the worship space – the pitcher and water, the communion table, the elements on the table, the lit Christ candle, the baptismal font. Ponder and reflect upon those symbols. What do they mean to you? On a day when the words of worship seem dry, you may find your sermon in visuals.

And of course, don’t neglect the view outside our windows. Notice if a bird flies by. Are there any clouds to form patterns on the mountains? Is the sun in your eyes? Is the wind blowing hard? And say to God, “How great thou art!”

The Spirit of God speaks to us in an infinite number of ways. If you do not find God’s word where you expect, be open to hearing it in an unexpected place in our worship service.

Our hope and prayer for you as you leave the sanctuary each Sunday is that you are talking about what God said to you and what God did for you, and what you said and did in the presence of our Creator.

Amen.