

Revelation 14:1-5, 15:1-4
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First Baptist Church, Vancouver
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Singing Songs of Victory
(Series: The Apocalypse of Jesus Christ)

Then I looked, and behold, the Lamb was standing on Mount Zion, and with Him one hundred and forty-four thousand, having His name and the name of His Father written on their foreheads. And I heard a voice from heaven, like the sound of many waters and like the sound of loud thunder, and the voice which I heard was like the sound of harpists playing on their harps. And they sang a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and the elders; and no one could learn the song except the one hundred and forty-four thousand who had been purchased from the earth. These are the ones who have not been defiled with women, for they have kept themselves chaste. These are the ones who follow the Lamb wherever He goes. These have been purchased from among men as first fruits to God and to the Lamb. And no lie was found in their mouth; they are blameless.

(Revelation 14:1-5)

Then I saw another sign in heaven, great and marvelous, seven angels who had seven plagues, which are the last, because in them the wrath of God is finished. And I saw something like a sea of glass mixed with fire, and those who had been victorious over the beast and his image and the number of his name, standing on the sea of glass, holding harps of God. And they sang the song of Moses, the bond-servant of God, and the song of the Lamb, saying,

“Great and marvelous are Your works,
O Lord God, the Almighty;
Righteous and true are Your ways,
King of the nations!
Who will not fear, O Lord, and glorify Your name?
For You alone are holy;
For all the nations will come and worship before You,
For Your righteous acts have been revealed.”

(Revelation 15:1-4)

The last book of the Bible turns out to pose the most essential question of our lives – both as individuals, and as human societies. The Revelation of Jesus Christ poses the question: “Whom will we worship?” We are going to worship – we are the creatures who worship; we cannot help it, we are constituted to worship. Every human being worships, and every human society worships. And through a kaleidoscope of imagery and symbolism and special effects, the Revelation of Jesus Christ, the Apocalypse of Jesus Christ, brings us face to face with this most essential issue of our existence: Whom will we worship? It turns out that everything else hinges on the way we live the answer to that question.

So, we are not surprised that in the drama that is the Apocalypse of Jesus Christ, in the drama that Jesus put on for John on the prison island of Patmos, we find all kinds of songs and hymns and choruses. By my count, there are at least sixteen songs, which throughout church history have inspired thousands of other songs, some of which we sang today. The songs are the logical response to what is revealed in the drama about who God is and what God has done, is doing, and will do in the world. When we finally realize what all of God's actions in the world are all about, we humans, along with the whole of the cosmos cannot but worship with songs.

Now the songs of the drama have two purposes. The first is to summarize the message of the revelation, the message of the apocalypse. As was the case in ancient drama, especially in Greek ancient drama, as the play unfolded, periodically an individual or a choir would step forward and review what had happened and prepare the audience for what was to come. If you read through the Revelation of Jesus Christ and find yourself overwhelmed or confused, simply step back and listen to the songs. The songs capture the gospel that is being portrayed in all the imagery, symbolism, and special effects. The songs in Revelation recapitulate, if you will, the core message of the whole book.

The second purpose of the songs is to pose that fundamental question – Whom will we worship? All the imagery, symbolism, and special effects are designed to get in our face with that question – Whom will you worship? Or, more to the point, Whom are you worshipping? Not just on the Lord's Day, during a Sunday worship service, but Monday through Saturday, morning, noon, and night, Whom are you worshipping? You *will* worship someone – who will it be?

Since the writing of the Revelation of Jesus Christ, the apostle John has been called the seer. Obviously so, for he was told to write down all that he sees. But John is also called the liturgist. I think it was the great preacher of the fourth century, John Chrysostom who referred to John this way the most. John the seer is also John the liturgist. John the seer, who is John the evangelist, is also John the liturgist. Of course! For when John sees what he sees, he worships. He has to worship; he has to sing songs. And through the songs recorded in his book, John the liturgist calls us to worship.

Now as John calls us to worship, he helps us realize the pressure we are under to worship anything other than the true God and Saviour. He helps us realize that we are under tremendous pressure, portrayed in spiritual forces like the dragon, and the beast from the sea, and the beast from the earth. We are under tremendous pressure to find our ultimate meaning in powers that have rejected or ignore the living God. As we saw in chapter 13, the dragon, the arch-enemy of Jesus, manipulates religious powers (the beast from the earth) to induce us to worship political power (the beast from the sea). We are under constant pressure to worship powers that want nothing to do with the living God. In the verses between the ones we read, Revelation 14:1-5 and 15:1-4, John speaks of those who worship the beast and his image. John tells us of this angel who in the midst of all of this pressure cries out in a loud voice "Fear God, and give Him the glory. Worship Him who made heaven and earth and the sea" (Revelation 14:7).

As John calls us to worship, he is honest with us about the capacity of his own heart to go astray. In chapters 17 and 21, he speaks of being carried by the Spirit through an angel – first into the wilderness where he is being given a vision of Babylon (the harlot as he calls it), and second into a high mountain, where he is given a vision of the new Jerusalem (the bride as he calls it). Both times, John tells us that after this vision, he fell down at the feet of the angel and worshipped the angel. John! You're the liturgist. What are you doing on your knees before an angel? Both times the angel has to say to John the liturgist, "Do not do that! I am a fellow creature, worship God." Even John's heart could slip into idolatry, as can mine, and as can yours – and as does mine, and as does yours.

John says he hears a voice from heaven (Revelation 14:2). The voice, he says, is like the sound of many waters – think the cascading waters of Niagara Falls. And like the sound of loud thunder – think the boom that rumbles through the canyons of the tall buildings during a storm. Like harpists playing their harps – think the melodious, healing sounds that come when Evie Loewen strums and picks her harp. To what is John referring here? Is it not what people have called throughout the centuries the music of the spheres – the celestial harmony? The Greek thinker Pythagoras and the Roman thinker Cicero both spoke of the universe being filled with music ... if you have the ears to hear. And for just a moment, in those crummy circumstances on the prison island of Patmos, John hears the music of heaven.

And then he hears people sing a new song (Revelation 14:3) – a song, John says, that no one could learn except the 144,000 purchased by the Lamb. I'm not sure what he means when he says no one could learn the song except those bought by the Lamb. Is he referring to a song whose words are kept secret until another time which one day the redeemed would sing? John calls it a new song, and the first time we meet that phrase is in chapter 5, where we are introduced to the worship of heaven, where after the Lamb who is slain takes the scroll from the One who sits on the throne, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders cry out "Worthy!" Or is John referring to the song we hear in chapter 15, verses 3 and 4, the song of Moses and the song of the Lamb?

144,000 – statistic or symbol? Symbol – all the numbers in the last book of the Bible are symbols. We first heard this number in chapter 7, where the Lamb seals His followers to prepare them to remain faithful in times of tribulation. $144 = 12 \times 12$, the whole redeemed people of God. Twelve representing God's people before the crucifixion of the Lamb, and twelve representing God's people since the crucifixion of the Lamb. Now, 144 would have been sufficient to make the point – all those redeemed by God. 144×10 would also have been sufficient, because in Scripture if you multiply a number by 10 it's a way of saying that's a really big number. $144 \times 10 \times 10$ would have clearly made the point, but John gives it as $144 \times 10 \times 10 \times 10$, to emphasize that God has a lot of people that He's redeemed, which is why in Revelation 7 he then says, "and I looked and behold a great multitude, which no one could count."

And now, in chapter 15, the 144,000 sing the song of Moses and the song of the Lamb. John says the 144,000 are chaste (Revelation 14:4) – they have not been defiled with women. He says they are blameless (Revelation 14:5) – no lie is found in them. What is John meaning here? Is he saying that the redeemed people of God have never had sex and have never ever told a lie? No. John is saying that the 144,000 have remained loyal under pressure. They had not succumbed to the alluring temptation of Babylon the harlot. They had not given into the pressure to worship the beast, dragon-manipulated political power. They had not lied when they were told to deny that Jesus was Lord. When push came to shove, they spoke the truth, and they named the name of the lover of their souls. And then accompanied by the music of the spheres, they sing the song of Moses and the song of the Lamb.

The redeemed see and therefore, sing. When you see, you sing. Now, before listening more carefully to their song, I want to step back and I want to hear it in a larger context – not only in the whole of the last book of the Bible, but in the whole of the New Testament. We find songs just about everywhere in the New Testament. Someone has said that the New Testament is a veritable symphony of salvation, so I'm going to invite you to listen to other parts of the symphony of salvation that the 144,000 have joined.

As I like to point out during the Christmas season, in the Christmas story at every major turning point, someone steps forward to sing. Mary, after her encounter with Elizabeth, sings her *Magnificat* (Luke 1:46-55): “My soul magnifies the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour” and she goes on to sing of the radical reversal that the birth of her son will effect in the world. Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, when John is born is filled with the Spirit and sings his *Benedictus* (Luke 1:67-79): “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel...” and goes on to sing of God visiting His people out of mercy and bringing light into the darkness. On Christmas Eve, a host of angels sing their *Gloria in Excelsis Deo* (Luke 2:14): “Glory to God in the Highest, and peace on earth...” The angels are singing what we could call the infrastructure for the possibility of world peace. Glory to God in the Highest, peace on earth. Glory to God, peace on earth; no glory to God, no peace on earth, as we will see in Revelation 16-19. Then, a few days later, after Jesus is born, Simeon the priest, holding the infant Jesus, sings his *Nunc dimittis* (Luke 2:29-32): “Now, Lord, let your servant depart in peace, for my eyes have seen Your salvation.” When you see, you sing.

So in the exposition of the gospel in the rest of the New Testament. The gospel is summarized in song. Ephesians 5:14: “Awake, sleeper; arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.” This song was likely sung at baptism services, as the candidate came out of the water. It’s not a bad song to sing every Sunday morning before worship – “Awake, sleeper, arise from the dead and Christ will shine on you.”

1 Timothy 1:17: “Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honour and glory forever and ever. Amen.”

1 Timothy 3:16: “He who was revealed in the flesh, was vindicated in the Spirit, beheld by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed in the world, taken up in glory.” This is the confession of faith of the early church put into a song, what Paul calls “the mystery of godliness”.

Romans 11:33-35: After developing the gospel of God’s grace in these eleven densely packed chapters, the apostle Paul bursts out into song: “Oh, the depths of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God. How unsearchable are His judgments, unfathomable His ways, for from Him, and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever! Amen.” Amen, indeed!

Philippians 2:5-11: “Have this mind in you, which was in Christ Jesus, who because He was in the form of God, did not consider equality with God something to take advantage of...” and goes on to speak of Jesus’ emptying of Himself, taking on the form of a servant, and being obedient to the Father’s call to go to the cross. And as a consequence, He’s given the name Lord to the glory of God the Father.

Colossians 1:15-20 – Oh, what a song! This is the song that grabbed hold of me while studying Physics in University, and changed the trajectory of my life. “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation, for by Him all things were made, both in the heavens and in the earth, both visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions, or rulers, or authorities, all things have been created by Him and for Him. He is before all things and in Him all things hold together. He is also the head of the body, the church; He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything.” He goes on to speak of the whole cosmos being reconciled by the blood of Jesus Christ. I wish we knew the tune to which the Colossians sang that song! Some day I hope I’m going to be able to preach that whole song for you.

Hebrews 1:3 – elegant poetry in Greek: “And He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power.”

John 1:1-18 – the prologue to John’s gospel – this word before the word was likely a hymn: “In the beginning was the Word. The Word was with God, and the Word was God. All things came into being by Him. In Him with was life and the life was the light of men and women. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness does not overcome it. And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” What a song!

Ephesians 1:3-14: I wish we knew this tune, because if we sang this song every morning it would change the way the day goes. “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ...” and then goes on to sing the benefits of our salvation – election, adoption, forgiveness of sin, hope, and the indwelling of the Spirit.

And then, the songs of the Apocalypse of Jesus Christ – sixteen by my counting.

Revelation 4:8: The four living creatures around the throne, say day and night: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God, the Almighty, Who was, and Who is, and Who is to come.” Over and over and over and over again. They never get tired of repeating the song! As they repeat it, holiness goes deeper into their being with each repetition.

Revelation 4:11: The twenty-four elders around the throne cast their crowns before the throne and they sing, “Worthy are You, our Lord and God to receive glory and honour and power for You created all things and because of Your will they exist. You created them.” How the world would change if we could sing that one song! As I have pointed out over the past months, Jesus is stealing thunder from Caesar, so to speak. Caesar is being hailed as Lord and God. When Caesar entered the senate, all in attendance were to rise and say “Worthy are you, to receive glory and honour and power, and wisdom, and might, and blessing.” All in attendance were to say to Caesar, “Holy One”. They were to say, “Righteous are your judgments.” They were to say, “Salvation belongs to you. Yours is the victory.” To sing “Worthy are You” to the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ, was and is, a powerful political critique – no political power has that place in the universe.

Revelation 5:9-11: The four living creatures and the twenty-four elders sing to the Lamb: “Worthy are You to take the scroll and break its seals; for You were slain, and with Your blood You purchased people from all over the world.”

Revelation 5:12: Thousands and thousands of angels sing “Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom and might and honour and glory and blessing.”

Revelation 5:13: All of creation breaks into song “To Him who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb, be blessing and honour, and glory and dominion forever and ever.” That’s one of the clearest statements of the divinity of Jesus Christ. The Lamb is on the same side of the divine-human divide as God – to God and to the Lamb.

Revelation 7:10: The innumerable redeemed people say “Salvation, Victory to our God, who sits on the throne and to the Lamb.” Stealing the thunder again – victory to the Lamb, not victory to Caesar!

Revelation 7:12: All the angels around the throne and the twenty-four living creatures, and the elders, all fall down on their faces and worship God saying, “Amen, blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might, be to our God forever and ever. Amen.”

Revelation 11:15: A loud voice from heaven: "The kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ. And He shall reign forever and ever."

Revelation 11:17-18: The twenty-four elders fall on their faces worshipping, singing "We give you thanks, O Lord God the Almighty, who is and who was, because You have taken Your great power and have begun to reign."

Revelation 12:10-12: A loud voice from heaven sings "Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of His Christ have come, for the accuser of the brethren has been thrown down." The great sniper has been thrown down!

Revelation 16:5-7: An angel sings, "Righteous are You, who are and who were, O Holy One, because You judged these things"

Revelation 19:1-2: John hears a loud voice, with a great multitude singing, "'Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God; because His judgments are true and righteous; for He has judged the great harlot."

Revelation 19:3: A second time the multitudes say, "Hallelujah! Her smoke rises up forever and ever."

Revelation 19:5: A voice from heaven says, "Give praise to our God, all you His bond-servants, you who fear Him, the small and the great."

Revelation 19:6-8: John says he hears the voice of a huge multitude, the sound of many waters, many peals of thunder, saying "Hallelujah! For the Lord our God, the Almighty, reigns. Let us rejoice and be glad and give the glory to Him, for the marriage of the Lamb has come and His bride has made herself ready."

What a symphony of salvation!

And then Revelation 15:3-4, which John calls the song of Moses and the song of the Lamb. Undergirding all the other songs, and gathering up so much of the theology of the other songs.

"Great and marvelous are Your works,
O Lord God, the Almighty;
Righteous and true are Your ways,
You, the King of the nations/ages!
"Who will not fear, O Lord, and glorify Your name?"

Now, why does John call this song of the 144,000 the song of Moses and the song of the Lamb? He's tying together two of God's greatest acts of salvation – God redeeming Israel from Egypt through the leadership of Moses, and God redeeming the world through the blood of Jesus Christ.

The song of Moses is found in Exodus 15, and many of the verses of that song are sung in other parts of the Old Testament. Moses and the people sang this song after being led out of Egypt through the waters. They sang it after they had crossed over the waters and those who had been chasing them are behind them being swallowed up in the waters.

"I will sing to Yahweh, for He is highly exalted;
 The horse and its rider He has hurled into the sea.
 Yahweh is my strength and song,
 And He has become my salvation ...
 Who is like You among the gods, O Yahweh?
 Who is like You, majestic in holiness,
 Awesome in praises, working wonders? ...
 Yahweh shall reign forever and ever."

In Revelation 15, John does not directly quote Exodus 15. Instead, he quotes Old Testament texts that were inspired by Exodus 15, like Psalm 98. This is the Psalm that inspired Isaac Watts to write "Joy to the World." "Oh sing to Yahweh a new song, for He has done wonderful things, His right hand and His holy arm have gained the victory for Him."

Why then, if John does not directly quote from the song of Moses, does he call this new song the song of Moses and the song of the Lamb? Because God's victory over Pharaoh and his armies is a picture of God's victory in Jesus the Lamb. In the Exodus event of liberating Israel from Egypt, God overcame. God overcame Pharaoh and his army, but that was the surface victory – the media would have gotten that. The real victory was over the gods of Egypt, the gods that held Pharaoh captive. Pharaoh was not the real enemy; spiritual powers, embodied in the human made gods of Egypt, were the real enemy. The ten plagues that God sent upon Egypt to rescue his people were aimed, not at the people, but at the gods of Egypt. Each of the ten plagues is aimed at a different god that was holding Egypt captive. Israel needed to be redeemed, but so did Egypt. So did Pharaoh!

Thus, the Revelation of Jesus Christ. The first century church was facing opposition, pressure, and persecution. On the surface level, the level the media would have understood, the enemy was Caesar – especially Caligula, Nero, and Domitian, all claiming absolute power. But they were not the real enemy. The real enemy was the arch-enemy of God, who hates Jesus, the dragon, the devil, the Satan – the same power that had gotten hold of Pharaoh had gotten a hold of Nero and Domitian. In the death of Jesus, in this apparently weak and foolish surrender to all those powers on the cross, God overcame the dragon and his beast.

And that's why John uses two titles for the song sung by the 144,000. They are singing this greater victory. In the Lamb, God has won a victory over all the powers that oppose Him. God has won the victory over all that keeps His people from entering fullness of life in the Lamb.

Now, like the song of Moses, the song of the Lamb focuses on who God is. The subject of this song is God, not humans. The subject of all the songs in the New Testament is God, not us!

O Lord, the Almighty. In the Bible, it simply means sovereign of sovereigns.

You king of the nations – all nations. The nations do not have to know it, they do not have to believe it, it is a fact, He is King of all the nations.

You are holy and Your ways are just. That's important for this song to sing in light of what we're going to see next week. In God's mercy and grace, God judges, God works to realign the moral and economic order, but all his judgments are just, says this song.

And like the song of Moses, the song of the Lamb then celebrates God's acts, not our acts. It is God who saves, not we who save, and all the songs keep the focus there – "Great and marvelous are Your works, O Lord God, the Almighty."

Now in the context of the Revelation of Jesus Christ, these great works refer to the full scope of God's work in the life of Jesus Christ. Great and marvelous is God's work in the incarnation – God becomes one of us and moves into our neighbourhood. Great and marvelous is God's work in the earthly ministry of Jesus – God is healing broken bodies and freeing people from addiction, and freeing people from everything that keeps them bound up. Great and marvelous is God's work in the crucifixion – where God is tearing down all that keeps us from His presence, bringing us into the Holy of Holies, satisfying His own wrath against sin, overcoming the power of death. Great and marvelous is God's work in the resurrection – calling out of the nothingness of the grave this whole new order of existence. Great and marvelous is God's work in the ascension – lifting up the lowly carpenter and putting him on the throne of the universe. Great and marvelous is God's work in Pentecost – where God, having rescued His Son, gives Him His Spirit, and the Son pours the Spirit on His people. Great and marvelous is God's victory over all that stands in His way. That's what they're singing. Great and marvelous is God's victory over all that keeps His people from entering into fullness of life.

So, rightly do the 144,000 ask in their song, "Who would not fear You, O God?" Yes, you can render that word, "revere" or "stand in awe of" or "be astonished by," but "fear" is exactly the right word. Who will not fear missing out on your purposes? Who will not fear being out of sync with your ways?

I like how philosopher Dallas Willard expresses it. The fear of the Lord, which is the beginning of wisdom, is "the fear of being crosswise of God" -- being out of sync with God. It is the "fear of not doing what he wants and not being as he requires." We all fear someone or something. Whom will we fear? Willard continues "the intelligent person recognizes that his or her well-being lies in harmony with God and what he is doing in the 'Kingdom.' God is not mean, but he is dangerous. One who does not, in a certain sense, 'worry' about God, simply isn't smart" (*Renovation of the Heart*, 51).

The songs in the drama in the last book of the Bible summarize the message of the book. They summarize the good news of the book. So... live in the songs! Live in the imagery and symbolism and special effects, but especially live in the songs. This Lent, take one of these songs – from the Revelation or somewhere else in the New Testament, and memorize it – repeat it over and over again, recite it daily, until it penetrates your soul to the degree that you experience the reality of the victory the song sings.

What has a hold on you that keeps you from entering into the fullness of life in Christ? Name it. Offer it up to the victorious God. And watch Him overcome it, and set your heart free – free to worship the Holy Lover of your soul who alone can set you free! Amen.