

United Church in the Valley: January 20, 2018
 Student Minister: Matthew Heeing
Making Space for the Spiritual
“...Through Worship”

Scripture Reading:

Excerpts from Revelation 4:1-5:14:

This is what I, John, saw in my Spirit-inspired vision.
 At first, I saw a throne in heaven, with One seated on the throne.
 And surrounding the throne were twenty-four lesser thrones,
 with twenty-four elders seated upon them.

And also in the center, around the throne, were four living creatures...
 day and night, without any pause, these living creatures sang this song:
*“Holy, holy, holy, Lord God almighty,
 who was, and is, and will forever be!”*

And as these creatures gave glory, honor and thanks
 to the One seated on the throne—the Living One, the Eternal One—
 the twenty-four elders would also bow down and worship.

They worshipped the age-after-age One,
 throwing down their crowns before the throne, saying,
*“You are worthy, our Lord and God,
 to receive glory, and honor, and power,
 because you created all things.
 Because of you and by your will,
 we live and move and have our being.”*

...And then, in my vision, I looked,
 and I heard the sound of many angels
 circled around the elders and the creatures,
 also surrounding the throne in the center.
 These angels numbered in the millions—thousands upon thousands!

...And furthermore, I saw every single creature
 in the heavens, and on earth, and under the earth, and in the sea,
 circled even *wider* around the One sitting on the throne.

I heard everything, everyone, all of creation, cry out,
*“Blessing, honor, glory, and power
 belong to the One seated on the throne, forever and always.”*

And the four living creatures said “Amen,”
 and the elders bowed down and worshiped.

Sermon:

How many of you have ever noticed this chair? [*Point at chair on the sanctuary stage*]

A few of you knew that it was there,
but did you care?

Were you aware of what this chair
might mean and represent?

Ever since I arrived here almost three years ago,
not even once, as far as I know,
has anyone ever acknowledged or pointed out
or offered an explanation for this chair's existence.
Every single Sunday, this chair has just been...there.

But today, I want to talk about it.
In fact, I want to help *transform*
the way you care and are aware
of this particular piece of furniture
so that over the course of the *next*
three years, and further—
this chair can be a constant reminder
of what it means to come and worship.

But first,
we have to recap last week's sermon
and revisit the idea of wonder,
and that will lead us to the Book of Revelation
and the vision within,
and that will lead us to this chair
and the importance of worship—
and worship will help us continue
on our current journey
of *Making Space for the Spiritual*.

But first, a little recap:
you'll remember that last week,
our journey started in Genesis—
the very first book of the Bible,
and the story of Creation,
*"In the beginning,
God created the heavens and the earth."*

And in that sermon last week we explored
how the way that this was meant to be heard
was first and foremost as a poem.

The story of Creation was written as a poem.

And *as* a poem, therefore,
 the purpose of that specific passage,
 is not to state a series of scientific facts,
 or to communicate an exact account of history,
 but more, to capture mystery, to move us in feeling,
 in the deepest depths of our innermost being.

This poetic explanation of creation,
 of God making space for us to exist
 was intended to move us past
 any literal insistence or understanding,
 and into a state and sense of wonder:
 a wonder of probing beyond what we see,
 a wonder of pondering how can this be,
 a wonder of immense, intense curiosity,
 of asking why, of mystery and awe.

The story of Creation is meant to make us wonder.
 And wonder, as we heard last week,
 is one of the ways that we start to make space for the spiritual.
 But a sense of wonder is only the start.
 From wonder, we are led to worship.
 For when we are filled with wonder, with mystery and awe,
 we cannot help but fall on our knees,
 and offer praise and gratitude and glory
 to something full of wonder far beyond ourselves.
 Our sense of wonder segues seamlessly to worship.

Worship is the natural result of wonder.

And if the opening lines of Genesis
 are all about wonder,
 it's the last book of the Bible,
 the Book of Revelation,
 that opens us to worship.

And what we find in the Book of Revelation,
 is not more poetry, but prophecy.
 Though probably not the kind of prophecy that comes to mind—
 of horoscopes and Nostradamus or a crystal ball—
 that's not the case at all—
 for the Biblical understanding of prophecy
 simply means a vision, a *revelation*, from God—
 a message from the holy for the present,
 not a prediction for the future.

And so here, in the Book of Revelation
we find one such prophetic message—
a revelation never meant to be taken literally,
but nonetheless intended to be taken seriously,
a series of incredible pictures and statements
part of which attempt to capture and proclaim
the importance of worship.

And in Revelation Chapters 4-5,
it all revolves around a chair.
To be exact, a throne.

*“This is what I, John,
saw in my Spirit-inspired vision:
at first, I saw a throne in heaven,
with One seated on the throne.”*

In this prophetic vision of the apostle John,
there is a throne.

And from there, John paints this incredible image
of ever-expanding circles all around this throne— *[speak the following while circling chair]*

*“And surrounding the throne
were twenty-four lesser thrones,
with twenty-four elders seated upon them.”*

*And also around the throne,
were four living creatures...
day and night, without any pause,
these living creatures sang this song:
“Holy, holy, holy, Lord God almighty,
who was and is and will forever be!”*

*And as these creatures gave glory, honor and thanks
to the One seated on the throne—
the Living One, the Eternal One—
the twenty four elders
would also bow down and worship.*

*And then, continues John,
in my vision I looked,
and I heard the sound of many angels
circled around the elders and the creatures,
also surrounding the throne in the center.*

*These angels numbered in the millions—
thousands upon thousands!
And furthermore,
I saw every single creature
in the heavens,
and on earth,
and under the earth, and in the sea,
circled even wider
around the One sitting on the throne.*

*I heard everything, everyone,
all of creation, cry out,
“Blessing, honor, glory, and power
belong to the One seated on the throne,
forever and always.”*

*And the four living creatures said “Amen,”
and the elders bowed down and worshipped.”*

John has this vision of the throne of God—
there’s this metaphorical seat situated right in the center,
the throne on which the sacredness sits,
and surrounding the throne
are circles upon circles upon circles
all the living creatures in the universe,
and the image keeps on building,
expanding outwards,
as Rob Bell says,¹ it’s like
the lights are turning on in the balcony,
and look—there’s an upper deck,
it’s like a stadium,
as more and more and more layers are revealed,
and *everyone* is facing in to the center—
for the one who is seated on the throne
is greater and more ineffable and majestic
and everybody knows that the action is there.
Everyone is aware
that there
is a throne,
and some One wonder-full is on it.

And they worship in response.

Wow.

¹ Portions of this sermon below are adapted from Rob Bell, *Poets, Prophets, Preachers* Film Series, Pt. 3, “The Science of Homiletical Architecture.”

This Spirit-inspired revelation,
 this incredible imagination
 is a powerful communication
 of what worship can be:
 a time when you and me,
 we re-orient ourselves
 to the actual center of the universe,
 we worship every Sunday
 in order to remember
 our intended, proper place in the cosmos,
 we worship every Sunday
 as one of the countless number of creatures
 from all of creation
 in a state of constant adoration
 circled around the One
 who is seated on the throne.

Because the worship service doesn't only start at 10am.
 It started an infinity ago,
 and at 10 o'clock our time,
 we're just joining in,
 contributing our prayers and song,
 to what's been going on
 for a very long time.

The Book of Revelation and the vision within
 present us with the importance of worship.

For here's the thing:
 sometimes, we like to think
 that this is *our* throne, don't we?
 I'll speak for myself—
 I like to sit in this metaphorical seat of power.
 It's easy to start thinking this is my place to sit.
 It's appealing, to be the centre of attention,
 where the action and the focus is entirely on me.
 There's a part of me, my ego,
 that craves such control
 that wants to be the one in charge,
 that wants to be the one to make the judgments
 and receive the praise.

[sit in chair while speaking]

And yet, if I'm honest,
 this throne is not where I belong—
 for every time I'm here too long,
 or even try sit on here at all,
 that's when things truly start to fall to pieces.

Somedays,
 I assume that this is *my* throne.
 My place, at the center of the universe.
 Maybe some of you,
 have been tempted by this too.

And so we gather, once a week,
 on Sunday morning,
 to remember that there is a throne,
 at the centre of the universe.
 But it's not my throne.
 And it's not my place to sit.
 There is a throne,
 with some One on it, forever and always.

Worship thus frees us
 to not have to sit there and assert our control,
 worship reminds us of our proper role,
 it keeps us whole, in body, mind and soul,
 because sitting on a throne that isn't ours can take its toll,
 there's a weight from trying to always run the show,
 that we no longer have to bear,
 when we see and care and are aware of this chair,
 around which the whole entire universe revolves.

Worship reminds us
 there's some One on the throne
 and it's not us.
*"I heard everything, everyone,
 all of creation cry out,
 "Blessing, honor, glory and power
 belong to the One seated on the throne
 forever and always."*

From our sense of wonder,
 we are led to worship.
 And worship helps us make space for the spiritual:
 it reminds us that we are not the centre of the universe,
 that we are not the ones in charge,
 that we are not the One who sits on the throne,
 but the ones instead that choose to sing
 the song that *everything*
 has sung throughout the ages,
*"Holy, holy, holy, Lord God almighty,
 who was, and is, and will forever be."*

Worship helps us make space
in our self-centeredness,
our selfishness,
our naval-gazing,
and personal praising,
our tendencies to try and take the throne,
to manage on our own, alone—
worship helps us make space
for the spiritual.

So people of God,
every time we see this chair,
even though it may be hidden back there,
may it help us to know
and always be aware
of why
we come to worship.

Thanks be to God.