



When in Our Music God Is Glorified

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Revelation 4:1-11

The Seventh Sunday of Easter

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Scripture Introduction

In later tradition, the four living creatures described in the passage we are about to read came to represent the four gospels, but John of Patmos, who received the Revelation, likely knew nothing of that. There are echoes of Ezekiel and Isaiah in it, but the four creatures are meant to represent the four compass points and thus personify the entirety of the cosmos.¹

Scripture

Around the throne, and on each side of the throne, are four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind: ⁷ the first living creature like a lion, the second living creature like an ox, the third living creature with a face like a human face, and the fourth living creature like a flying eagle. ⁸ And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and inside. Day and night without ceasing they sing,

“Holy, holy, holy,
the Lord God the Almighty,
who was and is and is to come.”

⁹And whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to the one who is seated on the throne, who lives forever and ever, ¹⁰the twenty-four elders fall before the one who is seated on the throne and worship the one who lives forever and ever; they cast their crowns before the throne, singing,

¹¹“You are worthy, our Lord and God,
to receive glory and honor and power,
for you created all things,
and by your will they existed and were created.” ²

* * *

Wendell Berry’s poem *Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front* contains these lines.

*Laugh.
Laughter is immeasurable. Be joyful
though you have considered all the facts.*

I often say, alluding to the work of philosopher Charles Taylor, that we live in an age that expects everything to be explicable: if it can’t be explained, it’s not real. Akin to that expectation, and just as

¹ Brian K. Blount, *Revelation: A Commentary*, New Testament Library, Kindle Edition (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), Kindle Locations 1691-1692.

² Revelation 4:6-11.

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widespread, is the belief that, if it can't be measured, it's not worth anything. In some ways, the belief is that, if it can't be bought and sold, it simply has no value in our culture.

Next to Wendell Berry's words about laughter I would offer these:

*Sing.
Music is immeasurable. Offer praise,
though you've considered all the facts.*

In a world that demands explanation and quantification, in the reign of scientism and the reign of quantity, in our culture of commodification, Revelation sticks out like a fool's ranting. It looks like, sounds like, feels like, some drug-induced hallucination. Listen:

[There] are four living creatures, full of eyes: the first like a lion, the second like an ox, the third with a face like a human, and the fourth like a flying eagle. And each of them with six wings, full of eyes all around and inside. And... the twenty-four elders worship and cast their crowns before the throne...

It's more than a little fantastical. This is easy to dismiss. It's just irrelevant, worthless jibber-jabber.

But Revelation paints the picture of a world ordered as it is supposed to be. Revelation, especially this part, is a picture of what is going on in heaven. This is the heaven Jesus refers to when he teaches us to pray, *Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven*. It is a heaven where things are as they are supposed to be, and he teaches us to pray that that reality would come ever closer to this one and transform earth into the way it is supposed to be.

The people to whom Revelation was addressed were a fragile community facing the overwhelming persecution of a vast and powerful empire: a culture, a reign of oppression. And John encouraged them to believe that, in spite of all the facts, God still reigned in heaven and her will would be done on earth. It was not an easy thing to believe; it sounded like jibber-jabber.

So sometimes, I think, these visions of heaven in Revelation are quite tempting for us to dismiss, easy to reject, because they are so very, very far from this earth we know where quantity, explanation, and commodity are what's real, are what's of value, are all that matter. Revelation is hardly that.

Revelation's picture of divine ordering is... Well, it is pretty weird. It is a picture of strange beasts and elders in worship before God. But Revelation is in essence an intentional counter-story. It represents a different set of cultural values over against the power of Rome. And although that counter-story reinforces what I want to say today, that's not why I sought out this text. I love this text, because it says this:

And the four living creatures, day and night without ceasing, they sing.

And the twenty-four elders cast their crowns before the throne, and are singing...

I love this text because it says, "There is singing in heaven." The whole cosmos is singing all the time. And in that we catch a glimpse of the world ordered as God longs for it to be.

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There's a pretty little, old-timey song called *In the Midst*. It, too, is a picture of heaven, and one of its lines is "O how sweet it is to hear Mama singing loud and clear..." For my friend Bill, who taught the song to me, it always meant that he would hear his mother's voice again, his mother who sang so beautifully. My mom has never sung much. To hear my mama singing, that would be something new. Revelation says that, if you've never sung before, you get to sing someday—with all creation, as it should be.

But Revelation is as much about the reality of heaven, about the presence of God, coming *this* way as it about our moving that way.

Our understanding of the presence of God is very much informed by John Calvin, especially by his view of the sacraments. The late medieval church talked about Communion in terms of trans-substantiation. The idea was that the bread really turned into Christ's body and the wine in the cup turned into his blood. Calvin's primary complaint with that way of talking was that it took the mystery *out* of the sacrament. Now we might think that it's pretty mysterious to say that the bread turns into the body, but for Calvin that was too *mechanical*: the bread literally becoming the body was too small an idea, too linear (too measurable, eh?).

Calvin sought above all to restore the sense of mystery. Calvin said that God was "present" in the sacrament but that you couldn't say where or how exactly. God was present, absolutely, unequivocally—but not in a way that one can control. Calvin spoke of *Real Presence* that could *not* be located specifically. According to Calvin, Christ is real and present as a *mystery*, not a puzzle to be solved or a riddle to be answered but a mystery to be entered. He wanted us aware of Something beyond us in this sacrament, genuinely beyond us *and* utterly real.³

That is true of Jacob's baptism, which we witnessed today. The water didn't become magically different when we said our words over them. But we believe God is present—free, mysterious and real, immeasurably, inexplicably, unquantifiably present and real.

Calvin also wanted to make that sense of mystery familiar, like water or bread. He believed that the sacraments should be performed at least every time the word was proclaimed. The presence of God should not be hard to access, but ready to hand. He wanted it so familiar that we would even acquire a taste for that very real and yet inexplicable mystery and presence of God.

That's why there is non-stop music in heaven, because music, like the sacraments, can evoke that uncontrolled, immeasurable, mysterious presence of God. Luther said it this way: "The devil, flees before the sound of music almost as much as before the Word of God.... Music is a gift and grace of God, not an invention of humankind. Thus it drives out the devil and makes people cheerful."⁴

Music is holy work. It can even make that sense of mystery familiar. It's so often right at hand.

³ *Institutes*, 4.17.1

⁴ Cited in various places including: Lutherans On Line:
https://www.lutheransonline.com/servlet/lo_ProcServ/dbpage=page&GID=01286001361024228333083583&PG=00021000001066495553812122

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Yesterday we memorialized one of our gifted musicians, Bobbi Humbracht. In my message at her service I pointed to the mystery of music. And I called her, and all of you up here in the choir loft, and those many musicians of you out in the rest of the congregation stewards of the mysteries of God. If there is one common phenomenon around us that can regularly evoke a sense of mystery, it is music.

Music—try to explain it. Try to analyze it. I found the Wikipedia article quite humble. The first line is *Music is an art form whose medium is sound*. What are you going to say? What is music? You can't hold it. Music is immeasurable. Oh sure, you can measure the vibrations. Waves caused by physical vibration in the air that resonates to our ears and vibrates our eardrums and then... what? It makes us remember an afternoon ride in the sunshine, laughing with children; it evokes memories of sunset and the touch of another's hand; it reminds us of stars and fireflies, of the whole expanse of the four compass points and can make us weep in an instant. Explain that. As one of my scientist friends wrote to me the other day, "For me, music has always been an example of how there are many ways of knowing that science cannot encompass."

Music is a mystery; certainly making it is. I have no idea how I learned to sing. In horse jumping they tell me that, as you and your horse approach the jump, you throw your heart over first, and the horse follows. You make a joyful noise and see what happens. And no matter the result, even if you've never sung before, you get to sing someday, so Revelation says. But, we remember, Revelation is as much about heaven coming this way as it about our moving that way. It's about heaven echoing here, even in the midst of hell.

Last year Alice Herz-Sommer died. Alice was a survivor of the World War 2 concentration camp at Terezín. Terezín was a German-run ghetto an hour from Prague that functioned essentially as a concentration camp. It was a strange hell. The Nazis used the camp as a kind of propaganda device. They would have the artists in the camp put on performances for Red Cross observers or others, while they were starving the artists to death.

Alice believed that music had made survival possible for her and for her son. "It protected us from hate," she wrote, "and literally nourished our souls." Even when she was exhausted, she practiced daily for hours.

Many survivors of Terezín recalled with reverence the concerts in which Alice performed, from memory, twenty-four of Chopin's piano études—physically demanding pieces that she undertook even though she was diminished by months of hunger. Willy Mahler (a relative of the composer Gustav), also a prisoner, wrote in his diary about an older couple reacting to Alice's playing the first étude. The wife clutched her husband's hand "and pressed her tear-stained face into it," he wrote. To Alice, the études represented profound philosophical reinforcement, a reminder of the fullness of human experience. "There is everything in them," she said. "Everything: all human life and all sensation."⁵

⁵ NYTimes.com: http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2014/12/25/magazine/2014-the-lives-they-lived.html?hp&action=click&pgtype=Homepage&module=mini-moth®ion=top-stories-below&WT.nav=top-stories-below&_r=0

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Alice and her son, Rafael, left Terezín when the war ended in 1945, and eventually she moved to Israel and renewed her study and teaching of music. Her son grew up to become a much-admired solo cellist. His mother's force of will, he said, made it possible for him to emerge from the camp emotionally intact: "She built a strong wall around me out of love and gave me such security that I could not find anything extraordinary in our lives." And it was largely music by which she formed that wall.

Many years later, Alice wrote to her grandson, Ariel, when he was away at school, "Beethoven was the most unhappy person," she said, "but he gives to us in his music, hope, strength, faith; he wants to say: Life is worthwhile, even when it is very, very difficult."⁶ Her letters convey a sense of urgency, almost an anxiety: not that her grandson would suffer or fall ill, but that he would fail to appreciate fully the art that gave her own life meaning.

Music does all that, and yet it eludes measurement and explanation. Thank you, musicians. And thank you in particular, choir, you auxiliary choir. That's what the Presbyterian *Book of Order* calls you—the "auxiliary choir." Your primary responsibility is to support the singing of the congregation. And do you ever. Yesterday, at Bobbi's service, you were magnificent. We all were able to sing with power, because you sang with power and conviction, in spite of all the facts.

Music is sacramental. Revelation describes it as omnipresent in heaven. And so it is a way that earth may, for a moment, be as it is in heaven. Elusive, immeasurable, and so utterly real, protecting us from hate and proclaiming in unearthly speech that indeed life is worthwhile.

*So, sing. Music is immeasurable. Offer praise,
though you've considered all the facts.*

Calvin believed that heaven, the place where things are as they are supposed to be, was never far away but instead very, very close, just the thinnest of veils away—when we pray, *Thy will be done on earth*, God's heaven is always this close and ready to break through. Every time we sing God's praises, we can almost touch it. So thank you, dear choir, thank you dear congregation, for crossing the veil. "There is singing in heaven." And though we may not touch it, sometimes we can hear it.

⁶ *Ibid.*