

## Silence in Heaven

Revelation 8:1-5

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In these Sundays following Easter, we have been working our way through the last book of the Bible—Revelation, this sometimes hard to understand, and often misunderstood book. Let me begin with two important reminders about the book of Revelation. First is that when you read Revelation, you need to remind yourself that you are reading something more like poetry than like a news story. On page after page of Revelation there is rich symbolic/poetic language that points to an important truth, but which, if you try to take it all literally, twists your mind up in a knot. It would be like reading the line in Joyce Kilmer's poem "Trees" that says:

A tree that may in summer wear  
A nest of robins in her hair

and getting all bothered by the fact that trees don't have hair. In a poem we understand symbolic language. We understand the image that the poem is conveying. Well, Revelation is like that: it is more like poetry with its symbolic language than like a news report with its literal language. To read Revelation and get all bothered by the literal description of dragons and beasts with seven heads and ten horns is to miss completely the truth that is contained in Revelation.

The second important reminder about Revelation is that it is prophesy, not prediction. Prediction is an attempt to describe what is going to happen in the future; Revelation is NOT that. Revelation is not some sort of biblical crystal ball and if you can figure out how to read the signs in that crystal ball, you can know what is going to happen tomorrow or next week or next year. Revelation isn't that. Revelation is biblical prophesy, and biblical prophesy brings God's word into our world that is already happening. Revelation is not about what is going to happen, but about what is happening right now, and what the word of God teaches us about how to live in that world.

In a way, you could say that the world in which the book of Revelation was written was not all that different from our world today. It was a world where there was wide economic disparity—rich and poor; there was conflict among nations; there were significant religious differences with some religions saying that they had all the answers and that anyone who disagreed with them was just plain wrong. There was oppression and greed; there was religious persecution. All of these things that were a part of the world of the book of Revelation you can also see in our world today.

So how are we to make it in a world like that? How do you live in a world when you have no way of knowing if this is the day that a crazed terrorist decides to park his car bomb in Times Square to see how many innocent people he can kill? How do you live in a world where every day 25,000 people die from starvation...while others of us are overeating and then throwing food away? How do you survive in a world knowing that earthquakes and oil spills and downright meanness keep happening? Well, that is the question addressed by the book of Revelation.

Over the last couple of weeks, we have seen that Revelation gives several answers to that question of how to live in such a world: one thing Revelation tells us to do is to come to church and worship God. Another thing we are to do is to sing praise to God. We do these things because the only thing that can get us through this troubled and dangerous world is the regular reaffirmation that this is God's world and that God is in control and that God is working his purpose out, even in those times when we cannot comprehend what God's will might be.

To get us into today's passage from Revelation, I need to backtrack and remind you of what has gone before to set the stage for this reading. The faithful have gathered to worship. Seated on the throne is God, and gathered around the throne to worship God are the 24 elders, symbolizing the whole church, God's chosen people from all times and places. The one seated on the throne is holding a scroll, and the scroll contains God's word. Unfortunately the scroll is sealed with seven seals, and there is no one worthy to open the scroll. It appears that God's word will remain forever hidden behind those seals. And John, who is writing this vision, says, "I began to weep bitterly because no one was found worthy to open the scroll." But then one of the elders sang out, "Do not weep; the Lamb of God is worthy to open the scroll." And all those worshipping joined in the magnificent chorus: "worthy is the lamb that was slain."

So the Lamb took the scroll and one by one broke open the seals. And with each seal, people began to see more clearly their world in light of God's word. They saw war and understood the sinfulness of war. They saw economic injustice and understood the sinfulness of that kind of oppression. They saw persecution and natural disasters in the light of God's word. And just to make sure we understood: John devotes one whole chapter (chapter 7) to the affirmation that God is in control, even in the midst of these calamities and terrible occurrences. He reminds the reader that God was in charge in the beginning; God will be in charge at the end; even now God is in charge.

Now if you were keeping count as we read the scripture last week, you realized that only six of the seven seals had been opened. That's where we take up today:

*"When the Lamb opened the seventh seal...  
there was silence in heaven for about half an hour."*

Silence in heaven. I think that one of the most difficult things that faithful people have to deal with is the silence of God. Yes, there are times that God speaks loud and clear and we can see God's hand at work. But there are other times when God is mute. God is silent.

I don't know about you, but silence often makes me uncomfortable. (Didn't you feel a little uncomfortable when I allowed that silence to happen when I was reading the scripture?) I had a fraternity brother who, every time he went out on a date, he would take with him a little index card on which he had written possible topics of conversation with his date. It was so there wouldn't be any of that awkward silence. Silence is uncomfortable.

There is an interesting classical musical work, written back in 1952, by the composer John Cage. It's entitled "Four Minutes, 33 Seconds", sometimes just called 4-33. In this work, which has three movements, the musicians never play a single note. The conductor raises his baton, but not a single note is played. The orchestra is silent. After a

period of time, the conductor puts down his baton, turns the page to the second movement and the same thing happens. For a total of 4'33" the orchestra plays not a note. Now for those of you who are YouTube people, you can see a presentation of this work. I watched the video a couple of times this week. I discovered that the silence for me was not just nothing; it was full of anticipation and expectation; there was tension. I had the feeling that at any moment the orchestra would not be able to hold back any longer and was going to burst into music.

It turns out that the silence was not really silence at all. You could hear all the ambient sounds that we often ignore, or are drowned out by the noises of our world.

Silence in heaven. What are we to do when it appears that God is silent?

*And I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and seven trumpets were given to them. Another angel with a golden censer came and stood at the altar; he was given a great quantity of incense to offer with the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar that is before the throne. And the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, rose before God from the hand of the angel.*

That's what you do. You pray. So here is yet another thing that John in Revelation tells us who are living in a dangerous and sinful world to do: we are to pray.

I've talked a lot about prayer lately; in the last several months I have preached several sermons on prayer. So at risk of repeating myself, let me say what I believe about prayer. It's this: prayer does not change God; prayer changes us. The reason we pray is not because God is sitting up in heaven waiting for us to stack up a big enough pile of prayers before God is going to act. It's not like God is looking down on us and saying, "I'd like to help out old John down there, but unfortunately there just aren't enough people praying for him, so I can't." It's not like God doesn't know what is best for us so is waiting for us to come up with some ideas which we voice to God in prayer—as if God might say, "That's a good idea; I hadn't thought of that."

No, God already knows what is best for us and God is already doing what is best for us. God knows God's good plan for us and God is already working to carry out that good plan. God is not waiting for our prayers to motivate God into action.

Prayer doesn't change God; prayer changes us. Prayer is a way that we are reminded that we are not alone in the world, but that God is here—in us, around us, working out God's good will. In a dangerous and sinful world, we have to pray because without prayer we can quickly come to the conclusion that the evil is going to win and that the darkness will defeat the light. Only in prayer can we again see the light.

In the Islamic tradition, the faithful are expected to pray five times every day. Isn't that a bit excessive? Five times? Interrupt your day five times to pray? No, that is not excessive at all. In fact, Paul says that we are to pray without ceasing. We pray over and over, frequently—five times a day isn't nearly enough—because it is so easy for us to forget that this is God's world.

Even when it appears that God is silent, we pray because we believe that God is there even in the silence. The Old Testament passage which Lee read about Elijah on Mt. Horeb showed that God was there in the silence. The anthem the choir sang has a line: "There's a song in every silence." It may appear to us that God is silent, but even in the silence, God is there.

*Then the angel took the censer and filled it with fire from the altar and threw it on the earth; and there were peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake.*

This is the word of the Lord.

**Thanks be to God.**

Peals of thunder and flashes of lightning recall that time when Moses was on Mt. Sinai, receiving the Ten Commandments from God. The thunder and the lightning were how the Hebrew people knew that God was there on that mountain. And the earthquake brings to mind that terrible Friday afternoon when Jesus hung on the cross and died. That day, when evil was doing its worst, and when God's power was defeating evil once and for all, the Gospel of Matthew tells us that the earth shook and the rocks split (Matthew 27:51). When Jesus was hanging on the cross and dying, it appeared that God was silent, even then God was at work saving the world. The thunder and lightning, the earthquake are pointers to the presence of God.

We pray...and in our prayers we discover that God is already here. God is already at work. God's will is already being done. Thanks be to God.✠