



Pastor Ken Nelson's Sermon

4TH EASTER PSALM 23 & REVELATION 7:9-17

MAY 8, 2022

"IN HEAVEN THERE ARE NO SOLOISTS"

Read Psalm 23...

Revelation 7:10 "And they cried out in a loud voice, salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the lamb."

The late Eugene Peterson wrote *"worship is the strategy by which we interrupt our preoccupation with ourselves and attend to the presence of God. Worship is the time and place that we assign to deliberate attentiveness to God - not because He's confined to time and place, but because our self-importance is so relentless that if we don't deliberately interrupt ourselves regularly, we have no chance of attending to Him at all."*

In my office I have a copy of a prayer composed by Pastor Charles Whiston, which I pray most days and especially before I enter the sanctuary to be a worship leader. Part of that prayer says, *"take me away from myself and my preoccupation with myself."* It's a good reminder to me that my role as a preacher and worship leader, as much as I value it and strive to be good at it... is largely beside the point. Between these four walls and for this sacred hour, the point is... always and entirely... God.

Maybe because of what I do I'm a bit sensitive to this, I'll admit, but whenever I hear critiques of worship... things like *"today's service didn't move me or that style doesn't inspire me ...I didn't like or I didn't care for"*, I'm a bit distressed. I'm torn between wanting to assess my (or our) performance of the liturgy and "worship well", and the realization that the only one whose voice matters in all this is the one to whom our worship is directed... Jesus.

About worship, our lessons today from Psalm 23 and Revelation 7 offer dramatic contrasts. Psalm 23 is a beautiful expression of personal dependence, reliance and trust in God. It is correctly called a psalm of provision - for it paints a picture of a loving creator, abundantly providing and protecting but also a shepherd/redeemer who walks with us through death to a table prepared for us, where we will enjoy His presence forever.

In a sermon on this Psalm, Pastor Leith Anderson likened the situation Psalm 23 describes to a sheep owner who loses one of his flock only to much later discover it at an auction sale. Even though he is the rightful owner, the shepherd would pay to have the sheep back again. That's God's redeeming love, and alone makes God worthy of our worship - we belong to Him any which way you look at it, by way of creation and redemption. We worship because God is preoccupied with us in every imaginable way.

Revelation 7 alters the worship narrative however, for nowhere in it is found Psalm 23's "my, me, and I. "In heaven's worship, there are no soloists. Every image of heaven's worship in Revelation portrays elders... angels... white clad saints, "great multitudes" as single mindedly focused on one thing- God their Savior, as Psalm 23 says God is single mindedly focused on us. In our Lutheran tradition, we speak in our baptism liturgy of the two ways God makes of us saints. We say *"God liberates us from sin and death by joining us to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ... and... in baptism we are made members of the church, the body of Christ."*

Our baptismal liturgy thus expresses beautifully the message of Psalm 23, where God shepherds us personally through this life of sin and death, and Revelation 7 where joined to others so personally shepherded through life's tribulations, we join the great multitude of God's people in worship. God is ours... we are his... and we are each other's!

Martin Luther considered the Psalms the hymnbook, prayer book and catechism of the Christian faith. In his writings, he often connected a Psalm to those expressions of Christian faith summarized in his Small Catechism - the commandments, the creed, the Lord's prayer and the sacraments of baptism and holy communion. Luther said Psalm 23 "belonged" to the 3rd commandment - remember the sabbath day, and the 1st petition of the Lord's prayer, to hallow God's name. To Luther, everything in this Psalm represented worship - table, oil, water, green pastures, all expressions of God's word and sacraments that restores our soul.

And yet worship as Revelation reminds us is impossible apart from others. We can have personal devotion to God, we can make personal sacrifices for the sake of God, but we cannot "personally worship" God. For that we need others, for precisely the reason Eugene Peterson stated - we must regularly interrupt ourselves so as to attend to who God is and the community in which God has placed us. We must, as Charles Whiston said, ask God to *"take us away from ourselves and our preoccupation with ourselves"*.

I hope you like today's worship- I hope you take something away from today's worship. But I am simply glad you are worshipping, and pray it is because you know of your own dependence and reliance on God, and how good it is to be around others who are aware of it too. Salvation belongs to our God, but your response to that salvation is tied up in that of the person sitting next to you.

It's been said the root of sin is love of self. It follows that you can't truly practice love without someone other than yourself to love. You can't practice love without a community. Theologian Fleming Rutledge said *"instead of making us independent and self-centered, Jesus makes us mutually interdependent and other directed There is no other way to be a disciple of Jesus than to be in communion with other disciples of Jesus."* It is with that understanding of what we're doing here today, that I say, *"I hope you enjoy today's worship."*

Before we sing our anthem, I'd like for you to pause, just a moment, look around this room, thank God you know these other people now, in this life, for by grace you will enjoy eternity with them. Then to the King of Love... whose goodness fails never, from sinners who by grace nothing lack, sing your praises that we are his and he is ours forever. AMEN