

**April 25, 2010: THE POINT OF WORSHIP**  
**Revelation 7:9-17; John 10:22-30; Psalm 23**  
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One of the last things I did at my home church before coming to Springwater was to help teach the confirmation class. One of the confirmands (Biff) wasn't so sure he wanted to join the church, and his reason (he thought) was in today's passage from Revelation. If this was what heaven was like, Biff reasoned, he didn't want to go. Not that heaven and the church are the same thing, but for Biff, it was a matter of personal integrity. How could he stake his life on an organization that billed as "perfect paradise" something so . . . well . . . *boring*. As Biff saw it, there are only so many hallelujahs a person can do before one begins to hope for a little more plot. Even if Handel's version of this passage makes it sound a little more exciting than what Biff feared, could you spend eternity listening to it?

There is more to today's scripture than "what heaven is like" or even the typical post-Easter theme, which is, "how to be the church." The context of this passage is about the paradox of worship: *who* we worship reveals a lot about us; *how* we worship reveals a lot about God. Of course, God is always greater than what even our best worship can express. Those folks in John's Revelation have serious grounds for worship. They have been through hell and high water to get there—persecuted for their faith, witnesses to the end of time—and now they're in the presence of God. Hallelujah!

My context last week was in a place where a person had conversations about artists' creative processes on every street corner. We were in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and two of those conversations expanded my understanding of what is going on in Revelation today. One conversation was about the work of a Russian artist named Boris Chetkov, who survived Stalin's gulag only to be sent to fight World War II. He returned from the war, and even after Stalin died, Chetkov's creative struggle to meet party approval was for the purpose of preserving both his hide and his art. Chetkov walked a delicate balance with the KGB, and despite this oppression, his work shows energy and reveals a world view transcending mere human perception. The triumph of his creativity reminds me of the praise of the witnesses in Revelation—that thing Biff thought sounded boring.

The other conversation was with Noel Bennett, who is a painter, weaver, teacher, and writer. Noel's creative process is one in which *doing* the painting is what reveals her artistic destination. Her technique is less about controlling the art than it is about trusting the process to *reveal* the art. This is where her creative process reminds me of the point of worship—trusting the *act* of worship (*doing* the worship) to reveal our sacred destination. The uncountable multitude singing their praise of God claim "blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might." These are the tools, the media, the elements of the art of worship. They are our process, the *how* of worship that reveals our "destination."

In her book *Traveling Mercies*, Anne Lamott has a chapter entitled "Why I Make Sam Go to Church." Her son, Sam, is the only kid he knows who is compelled to spend Sunday mornings in church, which Lamott does for two reasons: because she can (she's bigger), and because she wants to give him what she found, "which is to say a path and a little light to see by."<sup>1</sup> I can only hope Lamott's second reason for making her son go to church is why Biff felt he could overlook how boring heaven sounded to him, why he felt it was OK to join the church: because he discovered church to be the kind of place where he found "purpose, heart, balance, gratitude, joy" (Lamott). That's what

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<sup>1</sup> Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith*, p. 100.

worship is supposed to do for us. We live in a state where people claim to be “spiritual but not religious” if they claim to be anything. Lamott would say they are missing something. Our lives can be like a single letter of the alphabet, she says, which of itself doesn’t have much meaning, but by becoming part of something greater (by joining in corporate worship), our lives gain meaning. That’s what worship does—it makes us part of something bigger than ourselves whereby we individual “letters” become part of whole words and phrases and paragraphs. We become part of God’s story.

Part of Lamott’s reason for making Sam go to church involves the church ladies who rescued her when her life fell apart. She tells about how they loved her, supporting her in tiny gestures, while she learned to “endure the beams of love.” She concludes by saying, “It’s funny: I always imagined when I was a kid that adults had some kind of inner toolbox, full of shiny tools: the saw of discernment, the hammer of wisdom, the sandpaper of patience. But then when I grew up I found that life handed you these rusty bent old tools—friendships, prayer, conscience, honesty—and said, Do the best you can with these, they will have to do. And mostly, against all odds, they’re enough” (p. 103).

Springwater’s confirmands will decide in the next few weeks whether they, like Biff, want to officially cast their lot with folks like us and join the church. As we support them in their decision-making, as we remember our own decision to join the church, we might pay attention to those rusty bent old tools—friendships, prayer, conscience, honesty. In the act of corporate worship we discover they are (for us at least) more accessible than those shiny tools we admire from afar. It’s the process of worship (the just *doing* it) that makes them enough.

Worship itself is more utilitarian than you think. For one thing, that we are even called to worship means that we belong. In the words of poet John O’Donohue, “To be born is to be chosen.” By this he means that each of us has a special purpose, that embedded in our identity is an “invisible necessity” (*Anam Cara*, p. 83). Jesus tells his critics that his sheep (us) hear him and follow *because* “what my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father’s hand.” That’s *us*, what Jesus calls (greater than all else). This is what it means to be chosen: we are called, given an identity and “belonging” and *no one can take that away*. We express that truth in worship.

In worship our creativity wakens, our gift and giftedness comes alive, because we are joined with the One who sent us, who chose us, who created us with a particular destiny. That identity cannot be taken from us. That we worship is like the artist allowing the act of painting to reveal the art. That we worship means we trust the *how* of our lives to reveal the sacred destination. Because we know the One we worship is worthy, because that One has already made an irrevocable commitment to us. We can allow the process to reveal God as well as ourselves. This is the point of worship.

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