

“Thank God for Who He Is”

Revelation 4

A Sermon by Dr. Jim Davis

Given at First Presbyterian Church of Kingwood

November 7, 2010

Conversation; that's been our theme this year. How to carry on a conversation with God in such a way that Jesus words in John 15 come true for us. Remember? "Abide in me, and I will abide in you." Back in January, on the first Sunday morning in 2010, we read those words. And after we read them, we set a goal together; to try to learn how to carry on an abiding conversation with God.

Because, honestly, most of us don't. We don't have an abiding conversation with God. In fact, if we have a conversation with God at all, it's more of an intermittent thing. We pray when we're in church, or sometimes when we sit down to dinner, or when we're in trouble; or know someone else is. We have an intermittent conversation with God, not a continuing one, not an abiding one.

And the reason we don't is not really hard to discover. The roots of the way that most of us pray grow back through our experiences of prayer, our experiences growing up, watching people pray, and praying in Sunday school. That's where I learned how to pray. Maybe you did too. And I learned that when you pray you fold your hands, and close your eyes and bow your head and repeat some words that you've heard from someone else and add a few of your own. And when you run out of words you say Amen.

And that's how you pray. And that's how I prayed, until one year reading through the Bible I decided to be curious about prayer. I decided to try and discover all of the ways that people in the Bible carried on a conversation with God. And I was amazed when I did that all of a sudden prayer began to get bigger for me. It climbed out of the box that I'd put it in and took on a life of its own inside my life. I began a bigger conversation with God, a more varied conversation, a more vital conversation, a conversation that made the concept of a living relationship with the God of the universe more real to me.

So all this year, as your pastor, I've been trying to help you discover that kind of conversation, the conversation with God that the Bible encourages us to have. And for the last ten months we've looked at some of the ways we can carry on that conversation. We've looked at some of the ways Jesus carried on that kind of conversation with God in the gospels. We've looked at some of the ways the

first Christians carried on that kind of conversation with God according to the Book of Acts. We've looked at some of the ways David carried on that kind of conversation with God in the Psalms. We've looked at some of the ways Paul carried on that kind of conversation with God in his letters.

And the truth is, we've just begun to scratch the surface of what the Bible wants to show us when it comes to prayer; what the Bible wants to teach us about how we can deepen and broaden and widen our conversation with God. And so we come this morning to another lesson, another conversation. "I John, your brother, who shares with you in Jesus the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance; I was on the island called Patmos, on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. I was in the Spirit on the Lord's Day."

That's the way the book begins. It's John's way of saying that the Book of Revelation is, in a very real way, a prayer. It's a conversation between John and the Spirit of God that begins in John 1 with the words I've just read, and ends twenty-two chapters later with John's final prayer, "Come Lord Jesus." And maybe you've never thought about the Book of Revelation as a prayer before. And maybe you think you could never carry on a conversation with God in the way that John does in this book. But before you write yourself off too quickly, let me paint a picture for you.

I noticed this week that the Christmas decorations are starting to go up around Kingwood. Maybe you noticed too. So let me paint a picture for you. In just a few weeks you or I could well be sitting on a sofa in a living room or a family room, at the end of a long day, couldn't we? And someone could be sitting close to us, someone we love; a husband, a wife, a son, a daughter, a grandma or a grandpa. Can you see yourself in the picture yet?

And as you're sitting there, you're talking, aren't you? You're talking about Christmas, what it's been like before, what it's going to be like this year. Who's going to be there on Christmas morning. What the presents are going to be. What dinner's going to be like.

And then, then for who knows how long, you might not say anything to each other. You might just sit there together looking at the Christmas tree in the corner, or staring at the fire that's in front of you. And no words are being spoken. But the conversation's still going on. It's just getting carried on by images instead of words. Because you're seeing a vision, a vision of Christmas. And the vision will last until something interrupts it, and then it fades away. But for John, the vision wasn't interrupted and it didn't fade away. "I was in the Spirit," John says, "on the Lord's day, and then I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet saying, 'Write what you see in a book ...'"

And that's how the Book of Revelation came to be. It began with John in conversation with God, "in the Spirit, on the Lord's Day." And when the words trailed off, the vision began, not a vision of Christmas inspired by imagination, but a vision of the risen Christ and then a whole series of other visions; visions inspired not by John's imagination, but by the Holy Spirit, visions John was told to write down so that we too could see what he saw in his conversation with God.

And that's how we come to find ourselves this morning in the second scene in John's visions, in the 4th chapter of the Book of Revelation, standing in the throne room of God. And I don't know whether you know it or not. But you can go there. Or at least you can see something like John saw.

I first saw it twenty years ago, when I walked into the National Museum of American Art in Washington, D.C. Just inside the door, in an alcove, was an arrangement called "The Throne of the Third Heaven." The pieces had all been created by a man named James Hampton, a quiet janitor who worked for years in schools and offices in the D.C. area.

Hampton simply wanted to re-create for himself the vision John saw. He wanted to re-create God's throne room. So he did, in his garage. And that's where it was found, the whole scene there in his garage, just after he died in 1964. No one knew he had been working on it for 20 years. No one knew he had made it out of cast off items that he had found in people's trash - old furniture, gold and aluminum foil from store displays, sheets of transparent plastic—all held together with glue, tape, tacks, and pins.

On a bulletin board in his garage James Hampton had copied a verse out of Proverbs; "without a vision, people perish." And though no one knows much more about James Hampton, we do know this. He believed he needed to see what John saw. And we need to see it too. But we need to see not only the throne. We need to see the One who sits on it.

And so that we can see Him, John does two things for us in Revelation 4. He lets us see God from the outside and from the inside. First from the outside: "At once," says John, "I was in the Spirit and there before me was a throne in heaven with someone sitting on it. And the one who sat there had the appearance of jasper and ruby." What John sees is someone, but as he looks his eyes can't make out much. All they can see is a light, and it has the same appearance, the same color as the color of two deep red gemstones, jasper and ruby.

I don't know whether you've ever held a ruby or a jasper stone in your hand and looked through it at the light of a fire, or the light of the sun. But John had. And that's what he remembers about the appearance of God. And if the image reminds you of the way God appeared to Moses in the fire of a burning bush, it's probably not a coincidence. For the Bible associates God with light and with fire more commonly than with almost anything else.

But it's not what God looks like on the outside that John most wants you to see. It's what God looks like on the inside. So he moves from a description of God's countenance to a description of God's character. And as he does so he moves from images to words. And the words are part of a prayer, a prayer that is offered up to God, over and over again in heaven. "Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and who is, and who is to come."

The prayer, John tells us is part of the conversation of heaven. And those who pray it say nothing else because nothing else is needed.

"Holy, Holy, Holy ..." it means that God is unique. He is perfect. He is complete. God's love is not just love. It is perfect love. God's grace is not just grace. It is completely gracious. God's wisdom is not just wise. It is uniquely wise. That's what it means to call God "holy." It means that God defines good. "Good" is not an abstract value that God is measured against. "Good" is what God is, and God is "good."

But there's more. For the prayer that John hears isn't finished. It's only just begun. "Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord, God Almighty." The prayer moves from God's holiness to His power. It reminds those who pray it that God alone has the right to rule over everything; that because of who He is, God alone has the right to make the rules; to say what's right and what's wrong. For He is the Lord. And because He's Almighty, no-one in heaven or on earth will ultimately be able to defy him.

And there's still more. For the prayer that John hears still isn't done. "Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord, God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come." The last phrase of the prayer tells us that God is eternal, perpetually the same. He is now what He has always been. He will be tomorrow what He is today. His character will never change. His power will never wane.

And it's interesting to me that we should be hearing these words on All Saints Day because understanding who God is forms the basis for what the Apostles' Creed calls the communion of the Saints. Jesus you remember was once asked about the Saints of his age. And he replied by reminding those who asked him of God's words "I am the God of Abraham, and Isaac and Jacob" Jesus said,

"So He is the God of the living, not the dead" because He is the God who was, and who is and who is to come.

A God who's perfect, a God who's powerful, a God who's perpetually the same. And over and over again in his vision John hears these truths confessed, these words said out loud, this prayer prayed. "Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and who is and who is to come."

And the prayed as part of the conversation of heaven, not because God needs to hear it, but because those who pray it need to say it. And we do too. We need to learn each day to thank God for who He is. So let me encourage you to do something.

In all your praying this next week, pray the prayer that John heard in heaven. Say the words. Say them regularly, say them repeatedly. Let their truth sink down into your soul. Learn to thank God on a daily basis for who He really is and He will become more and more real to you every time you pray this prayer. "Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and who is and who is to come."

Let's pray ...