

## **THE MESSAGE**

**July 18, 2010**

**Revelation 4**

**The Rev. Dr. R. K. Miller**

*Mysterious Visions*

Today we begin a four week series on the book of Revelation. Notice its Revelation not Revelations. There is only one revelation because there is only one God one Lord one Savior of us all – Jesus the Christ.

I've discovered that when it comes to reading the book of Revelation some of people are thrilled, some people are confused, and some people wonder how this crazy stuff ever got into the Bible! No other book in the Bible is more discussed, more misunderstood, and more misused than the book of Revelation. So for the next four weeks, we're going to see what this book has to say to us today.

Scholars disagree about how to interpret and understand Revelation, so here are four things to keep in mind...

1) Revelation is a specific kind of writing style called apocalyptic – so too are the Old Testament books of Ezekiel and Daniel. This is not a common writing style in our day, but it was in the first-century. Its purpose was to assure people that God is still faithful in spite all the evil in the world.

2) Revelation has often been used as a crystal ball, a lens through which people try to read current events and predict the future. I invite you to see this as a misuse and a misinterpretation of the book of Revelation. That's not the intent of the book. Revelation is concerned with the present more so than with the future and not the 21<sup>st</sup> century present but the 1<sup>st</sup> century present.

3) Revelation was written by a man named John. And he is writing to seven churches located in what is today southwestern Turkey. So, to understand what God is saying to us in this book we need to understand what God was saying to those churches in the first century. Then apply that message to our 21<sup>st</sup> century world.

4) The core theme John is offering these seven churches is encouragement and support to persevere in the faith. These seven churches were facing some difficult and uncertain times.

So let's take a look at the first century world. It was around 90 A.D., Jerusalem had been destroyed and Rome had suffered through a number of arrogant and violent emperors, including Caligula and Nero. The culture continued to decline morally and ethically becoming more and more pagan & secular – sound familiar? By the way only ¼ of the American population attends worship on a regular basis. Uhhmmm.....

Spiritual complacency and cultural compromise seemed to be core challenges for these first-century Christians. Of course persecution was an issue, but Revelation speaks to churches in danger of dying from spiritual neglect more so than from Roman persecutions. John is addressing a spiritual issue concerning adult spiritual faith formation.

Revelation 4, our focus today, follows right after these seven letters to the seven churches, and the vision is connected to the theme of the letters. God has something important to say to their situation and their life together. So let's take a look at this vision.

John has a vision of God's throne room in heaven. Notice God has an open door policy. This throne room is the place from which God rules over all of creation. It's a vision of grandeur and beauty revealing God's majesty and power.

This vision is in sharp contrast to the emperor worship that had developed during the first century. Emperors were worshipped as gods on earth. In John's vision of worship everything points to God's glory in God's throne room in heaven.

While the identity of the 24 elders is uncertain, their function is clear. They worship God 24/7, honoring the Creator of all, submitting to the King by casting their crowns before God's throne. Crown here represents all their accomplishments – everything they have and everything they've done.

Notice the four living creatures in this vision. They are covered with eyes inside and out (what a sight) suggesting that they are fully aware of everything that is happening in heaven and on earth. AND -- if these creatures are aware of everything going on, then God is even more aware of everything that is going on. God is fully aware of everything you have ever said, or done, or thought about and God will continue to be aware of everything going on in your life. WOW!

This vision may seem really strange to us but to the original audience, to the seven churches, this vision offered strength for living the faith. It suggests that God's in charge. Say those three words with me. *God's in charge...*

Notice the focus in this vision is on God. God alone is worthy of worship and praise, not the emperors of their day. No leader on earth can compare to God, the Almighty. So not to worship God regularly would be a very foolish thing to do in light of God's power and presence in our lives.

This vision revealed a present reality and not some future event to be. If this vision is of God's Kingdom in heaven, these first-century Christians are being challenged to live into this same Kingdom reality on earth as it is in heaven. By God's grace and power, they can do so. God reigns on earth as in heaven.

So, what does this vision mean for us? May I suggest that, like the original first-century audience, we also struggle with powers and idols that entice us to false worship? Do we not also wrestle with spiritual complacency and cultural compromise? Are there not many things pulling

us away from worship -- or churches would be packed on Sunday morning, wouldn't they? How many of you really want to be here and not somewhere else? I know I would love to be back on Cape Cod. Coming to worship takes discipline and commitment because there are so many things that get in the way of worship.

Let me point to just one thing that tends to get in the way of our worship: consumerism. We live in a culture that worships the god of consumerism...

I want to introduce you to Stanly Johnson. Stanly is living the good life or so it seems. He has bought into the worship of consumerism. Check out this funny video... (play video --- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WFMwYNX5qUk>) I laugh every time I see that video. And I believe there is a little bit of Stanly Johnson in all of us.

The god of consumerism offers the good life of personal happiness by consuming more and more goods and services. The god of consumerism tries to convince us that getting more, consuming more, will make us happier, more content, more satisfied. The god of consumerism has convinced us that our needs and our wants are what's important and need to be the focus in our lives.

Now please don't get me wrong. I know that consumerism is the foundation for a healthy economy (and I do my part, just ask my wife...) but consumerism is deadly when it comes to discipleship and true worship.

Ahhhhh worship. If we're honest, we all tend to approach worship with a consumer mindset. It comes naturally. We all do it. The god of consumerism woos us into making worship all about us in so many ways. We love to critique it. I do too. We expect certain things to happen in worship and certain things to not happen. I do too. We want worship to make us feel a particular way. I do too.

If we don't like what we experience at one church, if it doesn't meet our expectations, we stop coming or we simply go to another church. That's consumerism. That's putting us at the center of worship. And we do it without thinking much about it. There are situation where we need to change churches but a consumer mindset has no place in any church. That's all I'm saying.

And yet, I do it too! I approach worship in a consumer mindset sometimes. I often ask people -- "So what did you think of worship, today?" Aughhhhhhhhhhh! That's the wrong question. The question we need to ask is this. "What does God think of our worship, today?"

Ahhhhh John's vision of worship challenges our consumer approach. In John's vision God stands at the center of all things. The 24 elders cast their crowns before God's throne. They submit their authority, they submit their power, they submit their very lives to worship God 24/7. Everything they have and everything they are they submit to the God.

They bow down and they worship God by saying, “You are worthy, our Lord our God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they exist and are created.”

Can you imagine a consumer attitude in John’s approach to worship? Can you imagine the elders in John’s vision saying, “You know, we sang that song last week and it repeats too much. (We didn’t know that hymn and it had too many verses.) If you don’t change it up, I’m not casting my crown down any more!” Or “I’m not feeling very fed by casting my crown down today. I’m thinking of going to some other throne room.” Folks -- that’s crazy talk, but that’s the craziness that exists when we approach worship with a consumer attitude.

I’ve said this before and I’ll say it again worship isn’t about us. It’s about God. We are not the focus of worship. God is. In worship there is an audience of one. We are the performers (so to speak) and God is the audience.

I’ve said this before too and I’ll say it again worship isn’t about what we get, it’s about what we give to God. So what are you giving to God here today in worship?

If you are holding back your offerings and your tithes for whatever reason than you are snubbing God. You are not snubbing me but you are snubbing God. And our worship isn’t complete. By the way our weekly offering is falling way short of what we agreed our weekly income would be. I’m asking you to prayerfully consider what you are going to do about that personally for the rest of the year.

Funny story, the other day I was talking with someone who goes to another church here in town. And he said to me kind of arrogantly, “Pastor, I hear that you have a money problem at Friedens.” I said, “Oh really?” And then before I realized what I was saying these words came out of my mouth. “We don’t have a money problem at Friedens. We have a giving problem.” And then he looked at me and said, “Yeah, we have the same problem at our church. Thank you for pointing that out to me.”

Here is the irony of living the faith as the book of Revelation reveals, we were made to pour ourselves out to others, to focus on giving not getting and in so doing we discover the good life. By giving ourselves to others we find the good life; a life filled with joy, and happiness, and contentment, and purpose that words can’t even begin to describe. Some of you have found that life and some of you are searching for it. It’s a life focused on God, on God who provides because God’s in charge. We worship a giving God and that makes all the difference for life.

My prayer is that God will make of us such a people of faith who, like the 24 elders, lay our crowns, our lives, our praise, our adoration, our entire being, at the foot of the throne of the One who alone is worthy of our worship 24/7. Amen.