

The Center of Worship

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If I take you into a store and show you a diamond ring, you'll look at it differently, depending on if you're a man or a woman. A woman will look at the cut of the diamond. She'll see how well it sparkles. She'll want to check out how the size looks on her finger. Those are the important features to a woman.

A man won't look at any of that. In fact, he really won't be looking at the ring at all. He'll be looking at the little piece of paper hanging down from the ring. The little piece of paper with the very big numbers.

One thing's for sure, though. Neither the man nor the woman will be paying much attention to the prongs. They are really just there to hold the diamond in place. If they're loose and the diamond falls out, then you'll notice them, because the real center of the ring would be missing and you'd want to know why. The ring wouldn't look right. But nobody buys a ring for the nice prongs.

Over the last few weeks, we've been paying attention to the prongs of worship. They are important aspects of worship, but they aren't the center. They are there to support the center. We've talked about worship as spiritual warfare. We've talked about how our total lives are part of worship. Today we'll be shifting our focus to the real jewel – which is Christ. He is the centerpiece of worship.

Now someone might say, "That's so basic. Of COURSE he's the center. Duh. Next subject." And in one sense, they'd be right. It is basic. But if it's true that Christ is the center of worship, then spending a little extra time focused on him is never wasted. And the more we reflect on what it means to have him at the heart of worship, the more truth we can find. We don't need to worry that we've exhausted the wealth of meaning we will find there. It's a well that won't run dry.

The text I've chosen for this morning is from the book of Revelation – the last book of the Bible. Revelation is written in a very different style that uses a lot of symbolic imagery. The writer, John, is having this vision of heaven that defies description. So he grabs for familiar words to convey a hint of what he saw, but not necessarily in literal terms. So as we read this through, I would encourage you to not get bogged down in trying to make sense of every visual picture he introduces, but instead let yourself get caught up in the scope of this vision.

Revelation 5:1-14

Then I saw in the right hand of him who sat on the throne a scroll with writing on both sides and sealed with seven seals. And I saw a mighty angel proclaiming in a loud voice, "Who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll?" But no one in heaven or on earth

or under the earth could open the scroll or even look inside it. I wept and wept because no one was found who was worthy to open the scroll or look inside.

Let's pause there for a moment. This is a deep crisis point. The one sitting on the throne is God the Father. Later in Revelation, we learn that the scroll in his hand represents all of God's plan for wrapping up history. It represents his judgment, his restoring justice and setting all things right. And nobody is found who can carry it out. We talked last week about how all people fall short of God's glory. But this says there wasn't even anyone in heaven – no high ranking angels could even live up to this task.

There is a need to carry out this plan, but nobody capable of doing it. And John is overwhelmed with despair. It looks like God's will can't happen. There is no means of putting it into action. There's a verse in the Bible that talks about all of creation groaning, and you can feel that here. There is a heavy weight hanging in the air that becomes unbearable for John. He doesn't just cry. He weeps and weeps.

But then comes the next verse.

Then one of the elders said to me, "Do not weep! See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals."

Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing in the center of the throne, encircled by the four living creatures and the elders.

Did you catch that? John is told to look at the Lion, and he turns and sees a Lamb that looks like it has been butchered. But somehow it is standing, and the elder says he has triumphed. In a way that turns everything on its head, Jesus triumphed by dying. It is the ultimate paradox.

He had seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. He came and took the scroll from the right hand of him who sat on the throne. And when he had taken it, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb. Each one had a harp and they were holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. And they sang a new song:

"You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth."

Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders. In a loud voice they sang:

*"Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain,
to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength*

and honor and glory and praise!"

Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, singing:

"To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb

be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!"

The four living creatures said, "Amen," and the elders fell down and worshiped.

What a fantastic turnaround. You can hear the joy and relief in the tone of the words.

And you can also hear this coming through loud and clear:

There is no one like Christ. His place in the universe is unique.

Nobody else was up to the task. Yet Jesus was able to show that he was worthy of carrying out God's plan. It killed him, it cost him everything, but he still triumphed. Hanging there on the cross, with his last dying breath he was able to say "It is accomplished."

He stands alone in all the universe. It is because he is so unique that he has to stand in the middle of our discussion of worship. He permeates everything about it.

Colossians 1:17

He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

Last fall, Derek was taking an astronomy class, and he told me about a discussion in class of how scientists have been able to identify all these small particles, but they can't figure out what it is that keeps them together. They just refer to it as the strong force.

Christ is what holds all things together in worship, and he does it on multiple levels. He functions in three very different capacities that we may or may not always realize. We can see that Christ is the center of worship in 3 ways. First,

Christ is our Worship.

He's not just the object of our worship. He IS our worship. Did you ever think about it in that way?

Ephesians 5:2

...Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

That means he is the gift we bring that is acceptable to bring before God. Our text in Revelation describes him as a slaughtered lamb. That is a direct reference to the Passover Lamb that Jewish families sacrificed every year. Just like they offered the lamb to God, Jess is what we have to offer. He is our worship. Moses said,

Exodus 15:2

The LORD is my strength and my song.

In other words, God doesn't just cause us to sing – in Jesus, he's the song itself. We sang this morning, "You are beautiful, my sweet, sweet song."

Only God could come up with a song of worship that would be holy enough for himself. We're celebrating the Lord's supper today, and we normally take the time to remember what God has done for us through the death of Jesus. But sacrifices are offered to God, not to people. Jesus was obedient to death not just because he loved us, but also because he loved his Father. The cross represents the ultimate act of worship.

How does that change anything for us? How does that affect what we do?

For one thing, it colors the content of our worship at New Day. When we come together to worship as a church, we always make it a priority to talk and sing and pray about who Christ is and what he did for us on the cross. What we say and do revolves around his death and resurrection. That's not accidental – it is an intentional choice every week. It is a way of constantly reminding ourselves of what is the core.

Beyond the content, though, knowing Christ is our worship will alter how seriously we take it. His presence is right here.

Matthew 18:20

And when two or three of you are together because of me, you can be sure that I'll be there.

If Jesus is right here, it changes our worship from being an objective, detached act to being very personal and relational.

Did you ever see the old movie by Woody Allen called the Purple Rose of Cairo? It was not a great film, so if you missed it, don't bother renting it. But it told the story of this woman trapped in a dead end life back in the Great Depression who would go to the movies every weekend to escape. She went to this same movie over and over. Then one day, one of the actors on the screen suddenly started talking directly to her. He broke through the barrier of the screen to interact with the woman. And the movie takes off from there, showing how that changed her life.

We can have the same attitude about worship that people do when they go to movies. There's a separation between us and what's going on. We can stay at arm's length. But if Christ is worship, he breaks that barrier, the walls we put up, and grabs ahold of us and changes our life.

I remember about 14 years ago being in a worship service at the church we were attending down in California. I was singing in the choir at the time. We were singing a worship song when all of a sudden I was overpowered by the presence of God in that

place. It was so vivid and it gave me a new love for worship that has lasted ever since. I've been in churches since I was a baby but that was a totally new experience that changed me forever.

Christ IS worship and that is powerful. He's more than the act of worship, though.

Christ is our Worship Leader.

Our true worship leader is really Jesus. It's not me. It's not Derek. It's not the band. The passage we read from Revelation said Jesus had made us into a kingdom of priests – people whose primary function is to serve God. But he himself is our high priest.

It was the high priest who alone could go before the ark of the covenant in the Temple. Only he could stand before God.

The writer of Hebrews tells us about the role of the high priest.

Hebrews 5:1-2

Every high priest is selected from among men and is appointed to represent them in matters related to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. He is able to deal gently with those who are ignorant and are going astray, since he himself is subject to weakness.

It is the job of Jesus to make our case before God the Father. Jesus steps into the role of our lawyer, defending us.

1 Timothy 2:5-7

For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all men—the testimony given in its proper time.

We often limit our thinking about Jesus' work to what he did on the cross. But he is still hard at work on our behalf. The Christian story isn't just about something that happened long ago in history – it is an ongoing drama, the act of Christ taking the scroll, filling the role we couldn't, and standing up for us before God.

What a great thought. The one radically unique being in the universe is concerned about my welfare and has taken me up as his cause. I love the words of an old hymn that say,

*And now for me he stands before his Father's throne,
And shows his wounded hands and claims me as his own.*

When I am overwhelmed by life and my own inability to do anything right, I can lean on Jesus as my worship leader, my high priest.

This past summer, we took a family hike up to Twin Falls, and it was too much for Annika's little legs. She still made it all the way to the top, but it wasn't by walking. It was because I gave her a piggy back ride most of the way.

My legs can't make it all the way to God. So Jesus picks me up and carries me. As the Shawn Colville song says, when I can't get where I want I climb on a back that's strong.

If anybody could speak to that, it was Job – the man who suffered all those injustices and was plagued by the voices of friends who reminded him he wasn't perfect. But Job said this:

Job 16:19-21

*Even now my witness is in heaven;
my advocate is on high.
My intercessor is my friend as my eyes pour out tears to God;
on behalf of a man he pleads with God
as a man pleads for his friend.*

Jesus stands between us and God and talks to him about us like we're his friends.

Christ is our worship. Christ is our worship leader. And one more thing:

Christ is our Worshipped One.

Let's look at the last part of the Revelation story one more time:

Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders. In a loud voice they sang:

*"Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain,
to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength
and honor and glory and praise!"
Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea,
and all that is in them, singing:
"To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb
be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!"*

The four living creatures said, "Amen," and the elders fell down and worshiped.

Notice what happens. Jesus is not only deserving of opening the scroll – he is deserving of the same worship that is given to God the Father. All the angels and the elders worship him and include him in their praise. Jesus is one with God.

He's not just a worship leader in the typical sense, as Hebrews points out.

Hebrews 10:11-13

Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God.

He's not only good enough to stand before God – He's good enough to sit down next to him and share his throne. He is one with God.

Tyler Roberts, a lecturer and head tutor of religion at Harvard University once asked his class, "Who was Jesus?" This is what he says. "Most said he was a religious figure. Some said philosopher, comparing him to Socrates. Then there was Jesus as political leader, with one student comparing him to Mao and Stalin."

At another Ivy League school, Professor Peter Bien was asked who Jesus was and he described him as a supreme model and not the Son of God.

I think about those statements in contrast to John's opening description of the Jesus he saw in Revelation:

Revelation 1:14-17

His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, and out of his mouth came a sharp double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance.

When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead.

Clearly this is more than a supreme model. This is different than Mao or Stalin. Those statements can only be made by people who really haven't met Jesus for themselves, because when we do encounter Jesus for ourselves, there is no choice but to worship him. He is our worshipped one. He is the one with eyes that burn like fire. He is the one who walks among the churches, whose face shines like the sun, whose death gives us freedom, whose life gives us hope, whose power gives us strength and whose love calls to our hearts and says come home. That is more than any great person in history – that is the Almighty Maker of Heaven and earth who alone is holy and worthy of praise.

In just a couple minutes, we will once again celebrate the Lord's Supper. In that one event, we meet Jesus on all the levels we've talked about this morning. We find him as our worship – the sacrifice before God that took care of our sins. We meet him as our worship leading high priest, representing us before God. And as we think about what he has done for us and who he is, we will want to join the thousands upon thousands of angels in heaven saying,

"To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power forever and ever!"

