



A SERMON

by Rev. Dr. Joanne Whitt: August 9, 2026



Holy, Holy, Holy!



The Curtain of the Revelation (1373–1383), n. 5: the elders prostrate before Christ in majesty. Tapestry by Nicolas Bofaille (1330–1405)

Lord God Almighty!

I'VE LONG BELIEVED MOST CHRISTIANS—most of us—get our theology from the hymnal – that people believe what they sing in church. And in fact, hymns are theology. They are words about God. As someone put it, “The hymns of the church are perhaps its finest commentary on faith and practice outside the Scripture.”ⁱ This is at least in part because they become familiar. Over a lifetime of worshiping in the church, we sing many of our hymns over and over, and we remember what we sing. That’s why we learn the alphabet by singing the ABC song. That’s why you still remember many of the words to the songs you listened to on the radio in high school, even if you can’t remember a thing about what you learned in your senior economics class.

The thing is, the theology in hymns can be good ... or bad, perceptive or trite, well-meaning or wrong-headed; lyrics may or may not affirm *biblical* theology and church tradition. If you’ve wondered why some hymns disappear when the church decides

to publish a new hymnal, it’s because some of those old hymns, even old favorites, contain some pretty appalling theology. “In the Garden,” for example, a sentimental favorite of a couple of generations ago, begins, “I come to the garden alone.” The refrain describes how Jesus walks and talks with me in the garden, and “tells me I am his own” – so good so far, right? But it concludes, “And the joy we share as we tarry there, none other has ever known.” Really? None other? I don’t think so, and neither did our Presbyterian Hymnal Committee. As one pastor on that committee commented, “‘In the Garden’ has done the worst in fostering the I-me-myself version of Protestantism in our country.”

So, taking an in-depth look at the hymns we sing is actually important theological study. And that is the study we’re undertaking during the next few weeks. We’re looking at some of our best-loved hymns and some newer hymns and the Scripture passages that inspired them. We’ll look at a bit of the history of those hymns, and of course, we’ll sing them. We begin today with the very first hymn in our hymnal.

Revelation 4:1-11

The Throne in Heaven

4 After this I looked, and there before me was a door standing open in heaven. And the voice I had first heard speaking to me like a trumpet said, “Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this.” 2 At once I was in the Spirit, and there before me was a throne in heaven with someone sitting on it. 3 And the one who sat there had the appearance of jasper and ruby. A rainbow that shone like an emerald encircled the throne. 4 Surrounding the throne were twenty-four other thrones, and seated on them were twenty-four elders. They were dressed in white and had crowns of gold on their heads. 5 From the throne came flashes of lightning, rumblings and peals of thunder. In front of the throne, seven lamps were blazing. These are the seven spirits[a] of God. 6 Also in front of the throne there was what looked like a sea of glass, clear as crystal.

In the center, around the throne, were four living creatures, and they were covered with eyes, in front and in back. 7 The first living creature was like a lion, the second was like an ox, the third had a face like a man, the fourth was like a flying eagle. 8 Each of the four living creatures had six wings and was covered with eyes all around, even under its wings. Day and night they never stop saying:

“Holy, holy, holy

is the Lord God Almighty,[b]

who was, and is, and is to come.”

9 Whenever the living creatures give glory, honor and thanks to him who sits on the throne and who lives for ever and ever, 10 the twenty-four elders fall down before him who sits on the throne and worship him who lives for ever and ever. They lay their crowns before the throne and say:

11 “You are worthy, our Lord and God,

to receive glory and honor and power,

for you created all things,

and by your will they were created

and have their being.”

CERTAIN SENSATIONS REMIND YOU VIVIDLY OF YOUR CHILDHOOD. I lived in Stockton for the first eleven years of my life, so for me, those sensations include the taste of peaches. The smell of chlorine. Trying to see across the street through dense tule fog, which doesn't seem to exist anymore. Impossibly hot pavement. And hearing our hymn for today, "Holy, Holy, Holy! Lord God Almighty!" It probably isn't even close to true that we sang "Holy, Holy, Holy!" every Sunday at Lincoln Presbyterian Church, but it felt that way. We sang it from the green hymnal, the Presbyterian hymnal maybe 4 or 5 hymnals ago.

So I thought of "Holy, Holy, Holy!" as the most Presbyterian of all hymns, and its centrality, its importance is reflected by the fact that it is Hymn #1 in our hymnal. But it was written by an Anglican. That Anglican was Reginald Heber, born in 1783 into a privileged and educated family in Cheshire, England. He was something of a prodigy; he translated a Latin classic into English verse by the time he was 7 and entered Oxford at 17. After Oxford he became rector of his father's church in a village in the west of England. There, he was something halfway between a parson and a squire,ⁱⁱ an English country gentleman. He loved his congregation, but he also had time to write. Which he did. He wrote 57 hymns. Heber was the first person to compile a hymnal ordering hymns around the church calendar - the church seasons like Advent, Christmas, Lent, and so on.

Heber abandoned the comfort and prestige of his life in the English village when he received a call to become the Bishop of Calcutta. He worked in India for three years, until the weather and his wide-ranging travel took its toll on his health, and he died of a stroke. His wife found "Holy! Holy! Holy!" among his writings after his death, and she passed it on to a noted musician, John Dykes, who composed and arranged the hymn for publication in 1861.ⁱⁱⁱ Heber had written "Holy, Holy Holy!" for Trinity Sunday, and so Dykes named the tune "Nicaea," because it was the first Council of Nicaea that formalized the doctrine of the Trinity in 325 A.D.^{iv} Heber not only specifically speaks of the Trinity in the hymn - "God in three persons, blessed Trinity" - he uses the symbolism of three over and over again: God is "holy, merciful and mighty;" God is "perfect in power, in love and purity;" God is worshiped by saints, cherubim, and seraphim; and God is praised "in earth and sky and sea."

Heber draws much of the imagery in the hymn from Revelation, chapter 4, our Scripture passage for today. Many people think of the book of Revelation as scary, and it does have some frightening images: four horsemen unleash destruction and calamity on the earth, mysterious numbers like 666 spell destruction; there are mutant locusts and multi-headed beasts and an end-times battle of Armageddon.^v Earlier this morning, Victor suggested that our "Peace" question be, "What is your favorite beast in Revelation?"^{vi} It's that kind of book. It doesn't help that what many people know about Revelation - or I should say, what they *think* they know - comes from the *Left Behind* series of novels, what one commentator calls, "Christian fiction on steroids." Or that Revelation has repeatedly provided raw material for self-appointed prophets to make predictions about future world events - none of which come to pass.^{vii}

Revelation is certainly one of the most difficult books in the Bible; it is what's called apocalyptic literature, and it's full of strange symbolism. Barbara Rossing, author of a Presbyterian Women Bible study on Revelation, asserts that the most important thing for us to know about Revelation is that it is a message of hope.^{viii} Revelation was written late in the first century A.D., during the last years of Emperor Domitian. The author of Revelation, John of Patmos, is a seer - a visionary. He sees the injustices and the tragedy of the Roman Empire: prosperity for some, violence and misery for many. There wasn't systematic persecution of Christians yet, but just attempting to be a faithful Christian in the Roman Empire made your life hard. If you openly pledged allegiance to Christ over and against the emperor, you were economically and socially excluded from the larger community. Saying "no" to Rome's emperor and empire was a daring, subversive claim.

So John of Patmos leads us through a series of visions. Visions are a standard feature of apocalyptic literature, which we might compare to science fiction today. There's space and time travel; there are scenes of terrifying and life-changing power. John's readers - his readers at the time - knew not to take these visions literally.^{ix} What we're intended to understand, to *get*, is that one after another, each vision in Revelation reminds us that God alone is worthy of our praise and allegiance. In the first three chapters, the visions take place on earth, and then, at the beginning of Chapter 4, which we read this morning, John is summoned to heaven.

The first vision in heaven is the heavenly throne room. God, we're told, looks like jasper and carnelian, two semi-precious stones, and God is surrounded by an emerald-like a rainbow. I'm not sure these particular images connect with our twenty-first century imaginations; I have a hard time getting past the idea that this emerald-green rainbow is missing five of its six colors. The point of the vision is the majesty of God. A fun exercise might be to conjure up a wildly imaginative image of God that would appear majestic *to us*, that we'd find truly awe-inspiring in twenty-first century Northern California. Would God be sitting atop a redwood tree? Would the monstrous crashing waves at Mavericks^x in Half Moon Bay bow down before God?

John pictures twenty-four elders casting their crowns before God. The line in "Holy, Holy, Holy" is, "casting down their golden crowns around the glassy sea." This is meant to echo the throne room of the Roman emperor, where people sang songs of allegiance and spoke liturgies of praise. Petty kings, subjects of the emperor, would throw their crowns before him as a sign of his supremacy, a sign of their allegiance and worship.^{xi} So John uses that image to remind us that only God, not the Emperor, is worthy of worship. "Only thou art Holy," wrote Heber.

Heber also lived in an empire – the powerful and at that time, growing British Empire. India was part of that Empire. On the one hand, we see Heber leaving a life of comfort to minister to people in a foreign culture. On the other hand, from our perspective a couple of hundred years later, we know that in empire, the goals of religion and the goals of economic and political domination get mixed together. How much of that could Heber see? I don't know.

What I do know is that Heber's hymn and the book of Revelation remind us that worshiping God is subversive of empire. I'm going to say that again: worshiping God is subversive of empire. It is the antidote to empire and to all the powers that are at crossed purposes with God's purposes. In response to the crisis faced by first century Christians, John tried to make the alternatives starkly clear: Do you worship the emperor, or do you worship God?

We still have to choose.^{xii} We don't live in the first century Roman Empire, or the 19th century British Empire, but imperial aspirations have been a part of much of U.S. history and are still alive today. The Scripture passage and the hymn raise these questions for us: What powers other than God are we at risk of worshiping today? To what powers do we give our ultimate allegiance? We can see obvious parallels to these concerns in what we've come to call Christian Nationalism, which conflates or rather subverts Christian values with a particularly xenophobic form of patriotism. But even if we aren't Christian Nationalists, there are powers we might fall into worshiping: success, wealth, technology; our idols are everywhere.

The community that worships God is the alternative to empire^{xiii} and to all the powers at crossed purposes with God's purposes. I'm going to say that again, too: The community that worships God is the alternative to empire and to all the powers at crossed purposes with God's purposes. The community set up by Jesus, a *universal* community of every nation, every language and every people, created by his witness of nonviolent love, forgiveness, gratitude, inclusion of the outcast, justice for the poor, and joy is a community that sings praise to God, *not the emperor*. It is a community that sings of its hope and trust that God's will for all creation is peace, freedom, healing, well-being, *shalom*. Songs are a huge part of the book of Revelation; there's lots of singing in the book. Maybe that's because, as one commentator writes, songs "unbind people from their fear."^{xiv} We all remember Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech from the 1963 March on Washington, but King came to the stage right after Mahalia Jackson, who sang, "I Been 'Buked and I Been Scorned."^{xv} King later wrote to Jackson that after hearing her sing, "I couldn't help preaching. Millions of people all over this country have said it was my greatest hour. I do not know, but if it was, you, more than any single person helped to make it so."^{xvi} Jackson's song unbound him from his fear. Think of "We Shall Overcome," and other Civil Rights era songs. Think of "Can You Hear the People Sing," from the musical, "Les Misérables," "Respect" by Aretha Franklin, "Born This Way" by Lady Gaga, "This Is Me" from "The Greatest Showman." I'm sure you can think of your own list of songs that motivate you, inspire you, and even unbind you from your fear.

I'm guessing that when you woke up this morning and decided to go to church, you weren't thinking that you were about to do something powerfully subversive. I'm guessing you weren't thinking that by singing hymns today, by praying shoulder to shoulder with each other, by hearing God's Word proclaimed, you were about to stand in opposition to the powers that strive to rule our hearts and minds, every day, everywhere: empire, consumerism, nationalism, racism, militarism, religious extremism, the destructive divisiveness in our political system. But you are.

And I never would have thought that one of the most traditional, most lofty, most Presbyterian of all the hymns in our hymnal – even though it was written by an Anglican – is in fact one of the most challenging, and even rebellious, but it is.

Holy, holy, holy! There is none beside thee! Who wert, and art, and ever more shall be! Amen, and amen.

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- ⁱ S. T. Kimbrough, Jr.
- ⁱⁱ John Julian, *Dictionary of Hymnology* (1907) http://www.hymnary.org/person/Heber_R.
- ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.faithclipart.com/guide/Christian-Music/hymns-the-songs-and-the-stories/holy,-holy,-holy,-lord-god-almighty-the-song-and-the-story.html>.
- ^{iv} http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Holy,_Holy,_Holy.
- ^v Barbara R. Rossing, *Journeys Through Revelation: Apocalyptic Hope for Today* (Louisville, KY: Horizons, Presbyterian Women, Inc., PCUSA, 2010).
- ^{vi} Victor is the Rev. Victor Floyd, Calvary's Minister of Congregational Care; the "Peace" question is a question that worshipers are invited to answer as they share the Peace of Christ with their neighbors in the pews. This morning's Peace question was, "What is your favorite hymn?"
- ^{vii} J. Nelson Kraybill, "Revelation Through the Centuries/Can I Get a Witness?" in *The Christian Century*, October 3, 2006, <http://www.christiancentury.org/reviews/2006-10/revelation-through-centuriescan-i-get-witness>.
- ^{viii} Rossing.
- ^{ix} Rossing.
- ^x If you're not familiar with Mavericks, you can grasp a sense of the awesome power of the waves in this video: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CcioR3ElH60>.
- ^{xi} Rossing; <http://clarke.biblecommenter.com/revelation/4.htm>.
- ^{xii} Martha Greene, "Whitewash," in *The Christian Century*, October 9-22, 2002.
- ^{xiii} Pablo Richard, *Apocalypse: A People's Commentary on the Book of Revelation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, English translation, 1993).
- ^{xiv} Rossing.
- ^{xv} For a video clip of Mahalia Jackson singing "I Been 'Buked and I Been Scorned" at the March on Washington: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FuQX33a9p44>
- ^{xvi} <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/jackson-mahalia>.

