

BELPRES CHURCH

Sermon Title: Before God's Throne

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Scripture: Revelation 7:9-17

⁹ After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. ¹⁰ And they cried out in a loud voice:

"Salvation belongs to our God,
who sits on the throne,
and to the Lamb."

¹¹ All the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshiped God,¹² saying:

"Amen!
Praise and glory
and wisdom and thanks and honor
and power and strength
be to our God for ever and ever.
Amen!"

¹³ Then one of the elders asked me, "These in white robes—who are they, and where did they come from?"

¹⁴ I answered, "Sir, you know."

And he said, "These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. ¹⁵ Therefore,

"they are before the throne of God
and serve him day and night in his temple;

and he who sits on the throne
will shelter them with his presence.

¹⁶ 'Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst.

The sun will not beat down on them,^[6] nor any scorching heat.

¹⁷ For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd;

'he will lead them to springs of living water.'

'And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.'"

Transcript:

Well, amen and thank you Worship Team for that. My name is Scott Dudley. I'm the Senior Pastor and want to welcome you here to worship. We are so glad that you are joining us today. Our scripture will be taken from Revelation Chapter 7, and we're going to start with verse 9, if you have a Bible.

"After this, I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count from every nation, tribe, people and language standing before the throne and before the lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice, 'Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne and to the lamb.' All the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshiped God. Then one of the elders asked me, 'These in the white robes, who are they? And where did they come from?' I answered, 'Sir, you know.' And he said, 'These are they who have come out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the lamb. Therefore, they are before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple.'"

So Holy Spirit, help us to understand this scripture, apply it to our lives and be more like you and be more focused on you. We ask this in the name of Jesus, amen. Well, some of you have heard me tell a story about a pastor that I know, a friend of mine at a church where this one time there was a group of people who'd been doing the coffee service every Sunday morning for a lot of years and they'd done a great job, but they were tired and it was time for someone else to take over. So a new group of people started doing it and the previous servers were happy until the new servers started to do things differently. Can't have any of that, right?

So instead of serving coffee in china cups, the new servers just put out the coffee with some disposable cups and just let people help themselves, which is a lot easier. The previous servers went ballistic and said, "That is not the right way to serve coffee in church." Okay, I have read the Bible cover to cover a lot, but I just must have missed those coffee serving passages. Maybe they were in Leviticus or Deuteronomy or something. The old group of people said that the right way to do it is to put the cup on the saucer and pour the coffee in and hand it to the person, and

on and on. This argument became such a big deal that my pastor friend had to spend 15 hours in meetings trying to resolve the great theological crisis of how to serve coffee in church, china cups or disposable cups.

Both sides behaved very badly. And for both sides, their world got very, very small, shrank all the way down to how to serve coffee in church. What's the best way? I don't know about you, but a lot of times my world can get very small. If I'm in an argument or if I have a problem, you can just ask my wife. If I got a problem, my world's just can shrink down to just the size of that problem. And this year, I think a lot of us have felt our world gets smaller because we can't see some of the people we love. We can't go to places we want to go to because of COVID. This Thanksgiving for a lot of us is going to feel smaller because we're not going to be able to have all the people that we normally do. Some people will even be alone.

Then there's all the problems in our world and in our country, the political divisiveness, COVID, the election, all kinds of stuff, where people are stressed out and it just tends to shrink our world down to the size of whatever problem we're focused on. This is the last sermon in a series called Greater Things. Next week, we're going to start talking about Christmas. But all throughout this fall, we've been saying that with Jesus, greater things are possible. A bigger world is possible. And when your world gets bigger, your problems start to seem smaller by comparison. That gives us more courage, hope and peace. I think we could all do with some courage, hope and peace. One of the keys to unlock that bigger world is what we just did, worship. Worship, which is what the passage that we just read is about.

Revelation was written by the apostle, John. In this passage, he sees a glimpse of heaven. In the Bible passages about heaven are really important because heaven isn't just for up there someday. But heaven is for here and now, as Jesus said, "On earth, as it is in heaven." In Seattle, as it is in heaven. In your home or school or office, as it is in heaven. And John sees this huge number of people from all over the world and his guide tells him, "These are they who have come out of the great tribulation." Lots of speculation on what the great tribulation is. Some people say, "Well, it's a period of persecution somewhere in the future, right before Jesus returns." And some people say that. "Jesus will come and take believers out of the world before that great tribulation or in the middle of it or after it or not at all." Other people say this passage isn't about the future, it's about John's time and the people who were martyred for their faith in John's time.

Others say, "No, no, no. It's just about any Christians, anywhere, anytime who suffer." It says, "They are before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple." And that phrase, before the throne of God, appears a couple of times in just a few verses. They're worshipping God. Worship isn't just what we do here on Sunday. It's that, for sure. But worship is what we give our time, our energy, our attention, our focus to. As I said before, "Show me your calendar and your credit card bills and I will show you what you worship." We need to be careful about what we worship because we tend to become what we worship. But when God is the focus of our worship, two things happen, when God is the center. First, before the throne of God, we find our courage.

There's a woman I know who currently spends most of her day in her room, on the computer reading news articles on Facebook, some of them not even true, watching the news, listening to talk radio, all kinds of stuff. She is just in a frenzy of fear about COVID, the election, divisive politics. You name it, she's afraid of it because she's worshipping the news. That's where her time and energy and focus is. Since we become what we worship and the news pedals anger and fear, she is very afraid and she is very angry. Yes, there are serious things that are going on in our world right now. But before God's throne, we realize that as big as the challenges we may face are, our God is bigger still. The people John sees in heaven have been crushed under this huge persecution, but the passage says this, they were holding palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne and to the lamb," which is Jesus.

So in John's day, people would wave palm branches during military parades as a sign of victory. Here these people are, they've come out of this great tribulation and they are saying salvation, victory, belongs to God and to Jesus. Before God's throne, we remember that Jesus conquered even death, which means that if we know him when we die, we will rise again just like he did. The other thing the cross shows is that God will take even the worst things and he will use them for good and he will bring good out of them. So what is there to fear? If God is going to use even the hard things to be the eventual servant of my joy, then what is there to fear? When I draw closer to God, when I am before God's throne in worship, I begin to realize that's what God does. Then it makes me curious. How is God going to bring good out of this? And that makes me more courageous to face the challenges that I face.

I got an email a while back from a woman who is a nurse manager in an ICU unit in a hospital. So she is on the front lines of this pandemic. She said throughout it she's experienced two emotions, fear and calling. She said she was afraid that she'd get the virus and pass it onto her husband and her mother, both of whom are in a high-risk group. She works in a hospital so she was afraid of getting it and passing it on to her husband and mom in the high-risk group. But at the same time, she said she felt a calling to serve the nurses that were in her care and that were working so hard. Well, she did get the virus and she was quarantined, worrying the whole time about her husband and her mother. But fortunately, they didn't get it. She got over it, but then she had some fear about going back to work.

She said, "I lifted my fear to the Lord and I didn't even know what to pray so I would just pray, help Lord." That is a great prayer. That is an awesome prayer. Then she got one of those thoughts that wasn't her thought and it said, "Think about what you think about." What a great phrase. Think about what you think about. And then she thought about Philippians 4, that says this, "Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable, think about such things". She said, "I realized all my thoughts were focused on COVID and the Lord was encouraging me to think about other things." So she asked two friends of hers to join her in a nine-week study on that one passage. Every week they would just study one word, whatever is true, noble, lovely. And she said, as she breathed in those words, the fear was still sometimes there.

But gradually God's... She said, "God's calling on my life began to get stronger than the fear. God's calling on my life to take care of the nurses in my charge became stronger than the fear." She worshiped, put her focus on God and God's calling got bigger than the fear. And it also gave her a bigger world, a bigger adventure, to be on the front lines battling this pandemic. Think about what you think about this week and focus on God. There's a lot of ways to do that. Music is very helpful for me in connecting with God. Bible, prayer, community, remind us who God is and remind me that God is my victory and he is here. And no weapon formed against me can remain. You will find your courage before God's throne.

Then the second thing we find before God's throne is a bigger world. The text says that, "John saw a great multitude that no one could count from every nation, tribe, people and language standing before the throne." And I want to focus on the word tribe because there's a lot of tribalism going on in our culture right now. Tribe can be anything we rally around that unites us as a group. It can be our ethnicity. It can be what kind of music you like. It can be how you serve coffee. My tribe uses disposable cups. My tribe uses china. We certainly see political tribalism all over our culture right now. I think everyone would agree, tribalism right now is tearing us apart. We only get our news from the sources that tell us what we want to hear. And if they don't tell us what we want to hear, we go find another source to tell us what we want to hear. We unfriend people who disagree with us.

So everyone we know thinks exactly the way we think. If you don't think the way I think, you must be crazy because everybody I know thinks exactly the way I think. That's because you unfriended everyone who thinks differently than you so you're in your own little echo chamber. All of that shrinks our world into a very, very tiny world of me and mine and my opinions. That's a very small world. But the vision in this text is a much bigger world. The passage says every ethnic group is in heaven, every nation, every language. We don't speak the same language in heaven, but somehow we're going to understand each other. All of those differences are not erased in heaven. They're enhanced. They're retained and they're enhanced.

It's like Epcot Center in Disney World. If you've been there, there's that section where there's all these different countries, Mexico, Sweden, China. You can go there and experience some of the food and the culture and the music of that particular country. Heaven is like Epcot Center, only not fake. It's real. It's not tribal. It's multi tribal, many tribes coming together, which to me sounds so interesting and so exciting to be multi tribal. When I was a graduate student at Stanford studying Renaissance literature, I started to listen to country music. Growing up in Eastern Washington, my whole family listened to country music, but I never really did until Stanford. The reason I started listening to it is because all my colleagues had been raised in places like the upper east side of New York. And I was raised in Richland. They spent their summers in Paris. I spent my summer on my grandparents' farm.

They always made these snooty little remarks about fly over country or rednecks or Christians, which pretty much described where I grew up and my entire family. It's one thing for me to lovingly joke about my roots, but it's quite another when you start to do it. So in the face of all this snoot, I started to listen to country music. My car radio is tuned to all the country stations so

that if my graduate student colleagues ever drove anywhere with me, country music would be playing, hurting their little sophisticated ears.

There was this one song back then that was popular back then. It was kind of my anthem. It was like my ballad, "I blame it all on my roots. I showed up in boots and ruined your black tie affair. Last one to know, last one to show, I was the last one you thought you'd see there. And I saw the surprise and the fear in his eyes when I took your glass of champagne. I toasted. You said, 'Honey, we may be through.' But you'll never hear me complain, no, because I got friends in low places, where the whiskey drowns and the beer chases," great line, that's a great line, "my blues away. I'll be okay. Yeah, I ain't big on social graces. Think I'll slip on down to the old Oasis because I got friends in low places."

Yeah, take that, you effete intellectual snobs! It was just my way of sticking it to the man. They mocked my tribe. I dug in, I doubled down, I had tribe pride. I flaunted it. Played country music whenever I could as a way of saying, "Oh yeah, sure, all you guys, you speak four languages and stuff like that, but can you level a combine or milk or cow?" Neither can I, but my cousins can. Actually, I have milked cows before. That I've done. But, of course, I wasn't really as down home as I was pretending to be because I was there studying Renaissance literature. How down home can you be if that's what you're doing? I'd analyze the country songs, "Ooh, nice chiasm structure there, Garth Brooks." Because see, I wasn't uni tribal. I was multi tribal, from a bunch of different tribes, eastern Washington, my grandparents were farmers, I milked cows and I also knew a lot about Shakespeare and Chaucer. And I love it all. I love my redneck roots.

My family kept me humble and focused on what matters all throughout that fancy education. But I also got to experience this wonderful world of Shakespeare and Milton and Chaucer. I love country music and I love opera and rap and rock and roll and bluegrass. Why wouldn't you love it all? It's just such a bigger world. The key to this kind of unity and diversity is worship because we can't create it on our own. In our solar system the thing that keeps the planets from crashing into each other is that they are all orbiting a common sun. We cannot create our own unity, but God can. And when Jesus is the center that we all orbit, we're able to appreciate our differences. So much of what drives tribalism is fear. Those people over there, they're going to take something away from me or they're going to have more than I have, fear.

But if Jesus is the center that we orbit, we realize he is with us and he will take care of us and I don't have to fear. So much of what drives tribalism is identity. I know who I am because I belong to this group. My politics or ethnicity or the music I listen to, or the coffee, how I serve coffee, that's my identity. It defines who I am. But when Jesus is the center that we orbit I realize what gives me my identity is that I am a child of God, redeemed in Jesus Christ. And before God's throne, I realize other people are made in God's image just as surely as I am and that we both needed Jesus' death on the cross to forgive our sins. That's our common bond. And now that person who has a different politics or ethnicity or culture or whatever is different, they aren't my enemy. They're my friend from whom I can learn. And God has put them in my life because they are my ticket to a bigger world that Jesus wants to give me, more ideas, more ways of looking at things, more experiences.

Jesus is not about small worlds. Jesus wants to give us a bigger world. I have been with Christians in Africa and South America and Asia worshiping with them, having no idea what the language is saying, but feeling very connected and very close to them because we are worshiping the same God together. I have danced in Rwandan prisons with Rwandan prisoners. I have sung songs 12,000 feet up in the Andes with a tribe that didn't even speak Spanish. They spoke Quechua and ate guinea pig every day, which I also ate every day. And no, it does not taste like chicken. It tastes like guinea pig. I have prayed with refugees in Greece, rubbish collectors in the garbage dumps of Manila and all of that has given me a bigger world, a bigger adventure. Our God is very big. And before his throne we find our courage. And before his throne we realize that the world is wide enough for both me and you, us and them.

Back in April, when my mom died, I shared with you that in sympathy, Gabe, one of our staff people, shaved off his beard and he had a very long beard. Well, after I told that story, I got an email from a woman who said that one Sunday, a couple of years ago, she and Gabe were prayer partners for pre and post communion. And this is what she wrote in her email. She said, "I could feel Gabe's genuine love for Christ and his love for people." And she said, "And then I focused on that beard, Gabe's beard, huge, distracting, defining, memorable. Then I thought about my son and I realized how much I hated my son's beard. It was even bigger than Gabe's. In my mind, my son's beard hung all the way down to the tops of his shoes. Think ZZ Top. It was epic. Not the picture I had of the boy I raised.

So I had to confess all of this to Gabe. I know God put us together so that I could deal with his beard issue. You see, my son was getting married at the end of that December. I really wanted him to shave before he got married. I really didn't want my son to have long hair and a long beard, even though I never said a word to him when he was growing it out during high school and college. But those wedding pictures were troubling me. What other people would think of him really bothered me and his poor in-laws! But then I met Gabe, who's delightful. And I had no opinion about Gabe's beard.

Gabe asked me about my son, his relationship with God, how he was doing in life. He asked me if I loved my son. Then he asked me if I liked my son. Then he prayed that I would be redeemed from the beard to a restored relationship with my son. Gabe's prayer caused an opening in my heart because now when I see my son, I see an independent, wonderful child of God, caring husband, loving son. I am touched by Gabe's concern for your grief at the loss of your mom and dad. It occurs to me Gabe's beard has offered much redemption."

God takes strangers and creates unity, heals silly separations, refocuses our priorities. Gabe led her to God's throne in prayer, which opened her heart to reconcile a cultural difference between her and her son and before God's throne, she found courage to not care about what other people would think and discovered a bigger world that was wide enough for both her and that beard. The problems of tribalism that we face in our culture right now run much deeper than beards. The fears we have now are much bigger and much more real than how wedding pictures are going to turn out or how someone's going to think of us. But we got to start

somewhere. You got to start somewhere and even during lockdown, we can have a bigger world.

So this week think about what you think about, just like that nurse manager did and found her courage and her world got bigger. She didn't even move an inch and her world got bigger because God changed her heart. Focus on God and prayer, scripture, music so that before God's throne, you find more courage. We need to do this over and over every day, every hour of every day. Then ask God to help you appreciate one difference in someone else's politics, culture, worldview, how they pour coffee, whatever it is, anything to break us, even if just a little, out of our tribalism, into the bigger world that God wants to give us. Maybe give that person a call on the phone or FaceTime them or Zoom them. Ask God to give you a bigger world.

And right now we're going to give you just a little bit of time to do that, to worship. This spring when the whole world was in lockdown, musicians from 50 countries put together a video of them singing Amazing Grace in a bunch of different languages and a couple of different musical styles. It's every tribe, tongue and nation. It's a Revelation 7 video. We're going to show it to you right now. Some of you have maybe seen it before. That's fine. Just use these next few minutes as you watch this video to worship, to pray, to focus on God. Remember, the people in this video probably would disagree on a great many things, but they are united in their worship of Jesus so that the words and the music connect you to him. Because before God's throne, we find our courage and discover that we are better together than apart as he gives us a bigger world. So let's worship.

(Singing).

We are better together than apart and before God's throne, we are healed. So Jesus, thank you so much that you are the healer. Lord, we ask that you would help us make you our common center. Lord, help us to find our courage in you because you are courage. Help us to find our hope in you because you are hope. Help us to find our peace in you because you are peace. Help us to keep you front and center and we will be grateful people and give you all the glory. In Jesus' name, amen.

Discussion Questions:

1. What is the multitude that John sees wearing? Carrying? What is the significance of that?
2. What are they praising God for? What attributes of his character do they mention?
3. What does this scene tell us about worship?
4. This is written to Christians who are being tortured and killed for their faith. How would this scene encourage them? How could it encourage you/us today?

