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December 12th: Psalm 106:1-18 & Revelation 4

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Confessing Israel's history of rebellion. The heavenly throne room.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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Transcript

Psalm 106 verses 1 to 18. He rebuked the Red Sea, and it became dry, and he led them through the deep as through a desert. So he saved them from the hand of the foe, and redeemed them from the power of the enemy.

And the waters covered their adversaries, not one of them was left. Then they believed his words, they sang his praise. But they soon forgot his works, they did not wait for his counsel.

But they had a wanton craving in the wilderness, and put God to the test in the desert. He gave them what they asked, but sent a wasting disease among them. When men in the camp were jealous of Moses, and Aaron the Holy One of the Lord, the earth opened and swallowed up Dathan, and covered the company of Abiram.

Fire also broke out in their company, the flame burned up the wicked. Psalm 106 is the

final psalm of Book 4 of the Psalter. Thematically it is very like its predecessor.

It retells the narrative of the Pentateuch, after Psalm 104 retold the initial creation story, and Psalm 105 told the patriarchal narrative, and some of the narrative of the Exodus. However, Psalms 105 and 106 tell the story in very contrasting ways. If Psalm 105 is light, Psalm 106 is shadow.

Psalm 105 tells the story in the most positive possible way, while Psalm 106 accentuates Israel's failure and rebellion throughout the whole story. Psalm 105 focuses upon God's action, whereas Psalm 106 on Israel's. Both are true accounts, but they need to be held alongside and in truthful tension with each other, as they are here in the Psalter.

In both of the Psalms, the Lord is seen to be persistently faithful, through all of Israel's infidelity. The Psalm is an extended confession of the nation's sinfulness, from the Exodus generation through the conquest and the era of the judges, right down to the Psalmist's present day. It will end with a prayer for deliverance and restoration.

The Psalm is largely an account of Israel's unfaithfulness, yet repeatedly punctuated by God's forgiveness and mercy. The whole thing is framed, however, by praise to the Lord. It begins with an expression of praise, and ends with a request for the praise of the Lord to be restored.

The Lord is being praised for his mercy, which is recounted within it. The many instances of God's mercy to his people throughout their history provide an impetus for confidence in confession, and a request for forgiveness and restoration. Against the dark backdrop of Israel's faithlessness, the resolute faithfulness and steadfast love of the Lord are more clearly perceived to be the determining factors throughout Israel's whole history.

Alan Ross writes, Psalm 105 surveys the marvellous acts of God with no emphasis on the sins of the people, but Psalm 106 continually reminds the reader of their sins in spite of God's works, which in fact necessitated many of those wonderful works. Peron says it well when he explains that all the glory of Israel's history is confessed to be due, not to her heroes, her priests, her prophets, but to God. All the failures which are written upon that history, all discomfitures, losses, reverses, the sword, famine, exile, are recognised as the righteous chastisement which the sin of the nation has provoked.

To keep the proper perspective, he also points out that there is not a single ode that sings the praises of Moses or Aaron or Joshua or David or of the nation itself. The historical accounts of Israel are almost always retold to warn or to rebuke the people. Psalm 106 has just such a didactic purpose.

It mingles hymnic material with lament in such a way as to move people to repentance and a renewed obedience while inspiring their praise. The psalm opens with a great declaration of praise to the Lord, a rhetorical question that underlines the fact that no

human being is sufficient to the task of fully declaring God's glory. In verse 3 we have an ironic beatitude, blessed are they who observe justice, who do righteousness at all times.

Such people are blessed indeed, but as we go through the psalm we will see that it is a continuing record of Israel's lack of justice and its unrighteousness. The ironic beatitude with which this opens then implies by virtue of the contrast that it sets up that Israel is due nothing of God's goodness but only his judgment and curse. The psalmist himself calls out for God's deliverance.

When God shows favor to his people, that he would also grant him to enter into the goodness and the gladness of his inheritance. Looking back on the history of the nation and their many failures, the psalmist confesses his unity and the unity of his people with their fathers. Like their forefathers, they have committed iniquity and wickedness.

Their fathers, who were in Egypt, who saw the great plagues that God performed upon the Egyptians, failed to consider the wonderful power of God, did not remember his steadfast love and the way that he had heard their cry. They rebelled by the Red Sea. They wanted to turn back to Egypt.

They accused Moses and the Lord. But yet, for his namesake and for his glory, God saved them and delivered them. He rebuked the Red Sea.

He made it dry. They passed through the deep as on dry land. He saved them from their enemies and drowned the Egyptians in the deep.

Throughout the book of Psalms, the Red Sea crossing is often returned to us as a paradigmatic event. A paradigmatic event of God's power over nature, the demonstration of his strength in the eyes of the nations, his power over rulers and kings, and here, an example of God's faithfulness and goodness and mercy and grace in situations when his people were rebellious and unfaithful. This deliverance in the face of their unfaithfulness actually led them to trust in the Lord that bit more.

The end of Exodus chapter 14 speaks of them believing in the Lord and in his servant Moses. And then in chapter 15, they join Moses and Miriam in singing his praise. Yet, even after God had done these great works for them, even after the plagues and the Red Sea deliverance, even after all the deliverances and provisions in the wilderness, they still failed to trust and look to him.

The psalmist alludes to their rebellion and complaints in chapter 11 of Numbers, where after their grumbling they received quail, but also a plague. And then chapter 16 with the rebellion of Korah, with Dathan and the company of Abiram. One of the characteristic sins of the people was their failure to learn from God's works and from their past failures.

And now the psalmist is calling the people to break that pattern, to reflect upon and to turn away from the sins of their forefathers, to look to the Lord. A question to consider,

what are the factors that enable Israel to tell such a truthful yet negative account of its own history? How might we better learn and practice the telling of unheroic histories of our own lives and of our peoples and nations? Revelation chapter 4 And he who sat there had the appearance of Jasper and Carnelian, and around the throne was a rainbow that had the appearance of an emerald. Around the throne were twenty-four thrones, and seated on the thrones were twenty-four elders, clothed in white garments, with golden crowns on their heads.

From the throne came flashes of lightning, and rumblings and peals of thunder. And before the throne were burning seven torches of fire, which are the seven spirits of God. And before the throne there was, as it were, a sea of glass, like crystal.

And around the throne, on each side of the throne, are four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind. The first living creature like a lion, the second living creature like an ox, the third living creature with the face of a man, and the fourth living creature like an eagle in flight. And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and within, and day and night they never cease to say, Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come.

And whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to Him who is seated on the throne, who lives forever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before Him who is seated on the throne, and worship Him who lives forever and ever. They cast their crowns before the throne saying, Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created. Key phases in the progression of the book of Revelation are marked off with the expression, In the Spirit, much as the related expression, In the hand of the Lord was upon me, works in the book of Ezekiel.

In Revelation chapter 4 verse 2, we encounter the second of these expressions. Chapter 4 opens up the main body of the book, after the messages to the seven churches. The next few chapters show a sort of heavenly worship service in the divine throne room.

The worship in heaven drives the events on earth. It will initiate the sequence with the seven seals, the seven trumpets and the seven bowls. There are connections here with what has preceded.

There's the voice like the trumpet, there's the open door, there's enthroned figures in white garments wearing crowns. All of this picks up imagery of the first three chapters. The heavens are opened at the very beginning here.

Heaven is God's dwelling place, it's the realm of his throne. And the door is the opening or the entrance to the temple. It begins with the trumpet summons.

We have trumpets back in Numbers chapter 10, which played an important part in

Israel's worship and coordination of its camp. Earlier in chapter 1, there was a loud voice on the Lord's day, while John was in the spirit in verse 10 of that chapter. John is told that he will see what must take place.

We might perhaps hear an allusion here to Daniel chapter 2, verses 28 to 29. This is what must occur in the last days. This is not necessarily after the events referred to in chapters 1 to 3. The whole vision that John sees focuses upon the throne.

Everything is ordered around that throne. In scripture, there are a number of different throne or divine council visions. We might perhaps think of the vision of Micaiah in 1 Kings chapter 22, or the vision of Isaiah in Isaiah chapter 6. In some cases, these are commissioning scenes.

In these scenes, people have a theophanic vision. They see the Lord enthroned and they are often set apart for their work. One especially significant example of this is in Exodus chapter 24, verses 9 to 10.

Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and 70 of the elders of Israel went up, and they saw the God of Israel, that was under his feet, as it were, a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness. We tend to think, in terms of God abstracted from his creation, of God reigning in his eternal transcendence. But yet the visions of God's reign in scripture tend to focus upon a throne room.

God reigns surrounded by a company. When God says, let us do so and so, he is probably addressing this company. He is not just speaking to himself.

In scripture, God reigns from heaven, and in the visions of the heavenly throne room, there are many different figures involved. There are living creatures, there are seraphim and cherubim, there are the seven spirits before the throne, there is the Lamb, there is the Son of Man, there is the Ancient of Days, all these different descriptions to describe a throne room from which God rules his creation. The character of this throne room is important.

It is a place in which creatures are present. It is a place to which we are supposed to be raised up. It mediates between the eternal, uncreated God who is transcendent above his creation, and the creation within which he is present and over which he rules.

It situates sovereignty within creation, not just over and apart from creation. God rules his creation from within the creation. Of several scriptural images of divine throne room visions, there are two that particularly stand out, which are important background for John's vision here.

The visions in question are found in Ezekiel chapters 1 and 2, and in Daniel chapter 7. Ezekiel chapter 1 verse 1. In the thirtieth year, in the fourth month, on the fifth day of the month, as I was among the exiles by the Chebah canal, the heavens were opened,

and I saw visions of God. And then in verses 4 to 10 of that chapter. As I looked, behold, a stormy wind came out of the north, and a great cloud with brightness around it, and fire flashing forth continually, and in the midst of the fire, as it were, gleaming metal.

And from the midst of it came the likeness of four living creatures. And this was their appearance. They had a human likeness, but each had four faces, and each of them had four wings.

Their legs were straight, and the soles of their feet were like the sole of a calf's foot, and they sparkled like burnished bronze. Under their wings, on their four sides, they had human hands, and the four had their faces and their wings thus. Their wings touched one another.

Each one of them went straight forward, without turning as they went. As for the likeness of their faces, each had a human face. The four had the face of a lion on the right side, the four had the face of an ox on the left side, and the four had the face of an eagle.

The vision of Ezekiel has a similar focus upon the throne as central to the vision. It also has a similar elusiveness in the description of the one who's upon it, giving the reader a sense that the occupant of the throne is too dazzling properly to describe. It's like gazing directly into the sun.

In Revelation, as Peter Lighthouse points out, there is literally a seating upon the throne. Ezekiel 1, verses 25-28 describes the throne scene. And downward from what had the appearance of his waist, I saw as it were the appearance of fire, and there was brightness around him.

Like the appearance of the bow that is in the cloud on the day of rain, so was the appearance of the brightness all around. Such was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord. And when I saw it, I fell on my face, and I heard the voice of one speaking.

In Revelation, as in Ezekiel, there is a bright rainbow of glory, presumably also symbolizing God's mercy, as in the covenant with Noah. It surrounds the throne, which is also surrounded by fire. In Ezekiel 1, verses 13, there are also flashes of lightning proceeding from the fire.

In Revelation, the fire is associated with the seven spirits of God, which are like seven torches of fire. Like the seven lampstands of chapter 1, these can be a sort of counterpart in heaven. In Ezekiel 1, verse 22, there is also an expanse like crystal, which corresponds to the sea of glass like crystal in Revelation 4, verse 6. There is a further vision that gives a good background for this, and it's found in Daniel 7, verses 9-14.

A stream of fire issued and came out from before him. A thousand thousands served him, and ten thousand times ten thousands stood before him. The court sat in judgment,

and the books were opened.

I looked then because of the sound of the great words that the horn was speaking. And as I looked, the beast was killed, and its body destroyed and given over to be burned with fire. As for the rest of the beasts, their dominion was taken away, but their lives were prolonged for a season at a time.

I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven, there came one like a son of man, and he came to the ancient of days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.

Greg Beale notes that there are extensive parallels with Revelation 4 and 5 here. He lists them as follows. First, there is the introductory vision phraseology.

Second, a throne or thrones set in heaven. Third, God sitting on a throne. Fourth, God's appearance on the throne.

Fifth, fire before the throne. Sixth, heavenly servants surrounding the throne. Seventh, books before the throne.

Eighth, the books opened. Ninth, a divine or messianic figure approaching God's throne to receive authority to reign forever over a kingdom. Tenth, the kingdom's scope, all peoples, nations and tongues.

Eleventh, the seer's emotional distress on account of the vision. Twelfth, the seer's reception of heavenly counsel concerning the vision from one of the heavenly throne servants. Thirteenth, the saints given divine authority to reign over a kingdom.

And fourteenth, concluding mention of God's eternal reign. These are visions of a temple throne room. And as we look through it we will see many different elements that are associated with the earthly temple.

However, they are not separated out into different rooms. They all are in the same place. The throne, for instance, should be related to the Ark of the Covenant and the mercy seat.

The Lord is enthroned upon the cherubim and the Ark is the footstool of his throne. The torches of the spirit might be compared to the lampstands. The Jasper, Carnelian and Emerald of verse 3 anticipate the many precious stones of the vision of the New Jerusalem at the end of the book.

They also recall the imagery of further Old Testament visions, such as that of Ezekiel chapter 28, where the holy mountain and the garden of God are described as having

stones of fire, with precious stones as the covering for the guardian cherub in verses 13 and 14. The stones in Ezekiel chapter 28, as Daniel, Bloch and others have observed, closely resemble the stones on the high priest's garment. More importantly, the figure has the appearance of Jasper and Carnelian, or Sardis.

These are the first and the last stones on the high priest's breastplate. They are ordered according to the names of the tribes of Israel. The figure on the throne, then, is the divine origin, of whom Israel is a pale earthly reflection.

The throne is surrounded by various figures, by elders and living creatures, 24 of the former and 4 of the latter, 28 in total. What do they represent? Some have suggested that they represent 12 tribes and 12 apostles. Some connect them with 24 hours of the day.

Lighthouse suggest that they relate to the 24 courses of priests in the temple. Like the priests and the Levites, they offer musical worship and offer incense. They are chief priests, dressed in white garments like priests, and crowned with golden crowns.

They are likely heavenly angels, ministers of the old covenant, representing the people of Israel. Before the book of Revelation is finished, other figures will have taken their place. With the 4 living creatures, we have 28, 4 times 7, representative figures.

Perhaps there are 4 companies of elders, each associated with one of the living creatures, who are a 4-fold correspondence to the 7-fold spirit of God. The throne room and its scenes here are similar to scenes of ancient throne rooms. This should not be presumed to be accidental.

Earthly throne rooms are modelled after the heavenly throne room. There are flashes of lightning, rumblings and thunder. This is reminiscent of Sinai, of course, but these also reappear at key points in the book, following the seals in chapter 8 verse 5, following the trumpets in chapter 11 verse 19, and following the bowls in chapter 16 verse 18.

There are 7 torches of fire, which are the 7 spirits of God. These are lights above, represented by lights below, corresponding with the lampstands that we've seen in the previous chapters. The 7 spirits of God are the one spirit of God, but 7-fold.

Just as flame can be divided into different tongues and then joined back together, so the spirit is one, but can nonetheless be 7-fold. The crystal sea seems to relate to the firmament. It's the boundary between heaven and earth, established on the second day of creation.

This is described from below in Exodus chapter 24 and also in Ezekiel chapter 1, but here it is described from above. The sea is glass, the waters are pacified in heaven, although they are unruly on earth. The living creatures are like the living creatures in Ezekiel chapter 1, although they're not accompanied by wheels, because this is not a moveable

throne in Revelation.

Ezekiel's living creatures, or cherubim, each have four faces, whereas John's each have one of the faces of the four. The living creatures are each situated on a particular side of the throne. The ordering seems to be significant.

There are various occasions in Scripture where ordering according to points of the compass is stipulated. We see this in the ordering of the camp of Israel in Numbers and in Ezekiel and then later in Revelation. The living creatures of Ezekiel are also ordered according to the compass.

Lighthouse suggest that there might be astral imagery at play in the heavenly throne room. The throne corresponds to the sun, the seven torches correspond to the seven planets, the four living creatures to the principal zodiacal sign for each of the points of the compass. They are full of eyes in front and behind.

It would not be unreasonable to connect the eyes with stars. We've already seen burning eyes in previous chapters. The 24 living creatures might also correspond to the deacons, the celestial deities.

Isaiah has a throne vision in Isaiah chapter 6, verses 1 to 4. In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and the train of His robe filled the temple. Above Him stood the seraphim, each had six wings. With two He covered His face, and with two He covered His feet, and with two He flew.

And one called to another and said, Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts, the whole earth is full of His glory. And the foundations of the threshold shook at the voice of Him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. The living creatures are like the seraphim in having six wings and in their statement of God's holiness to each other.

The seraphim are, quite literally, burning ones, who are like living lightning. The appearance of the living creatures in Ezekiel's vision in chapter 1, verse 14 is also described as being like flashes of lightning. The declaration, Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come, adds to the antiphonal statement of Isaiah's seraphim, the further title of the Lord, who was and is and is to come, and the threefold name, Lord God Almighty.

The title, who was and is and is to come, draws our mind back to the name that God declares to Moses in Exodus chapter 3. The living creatures here initiate the movement of worship that the 24 elders will then take up, praising God on account of His creation. The chapters that follow will all take their starting point from this vision of an ordered realm, the place from which God reigns in glory, and whose great order will be impressed upon the earth, as God's will will one day be done on the earth as it is done in heaven. A question to consider, why might it be significant that there are apparent

parallels between the highest heavens, where God dwells, and the visible celestial heavens?