

“Amen!”

Revelation 7:9-17

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This is the second in series of three sermons from the Book of Revelation, all having in some way something to do with Revelation’s understanding of Christian worship.

A hallmark of evangelical and Black worship has been a call and response rhythm. Members of the congregation spontaneously answer the speaker’s proclamation with phrases like Amen! Preach it! Ummmmm! Go on! Take your time! Or, as Jane Pursley remembers, “Can I get a witness?” In some churches there was an “Amen Corner,” a pew reserved for a sort of voice choir, whose job it was to lead the congregation in such responses. “Amen” has never been only the province of the preacher; it has belonged to the entire assembly.

Most of you know that for fifteen years I served a Congregational Christian Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan—filled with fine people, but

they were surely one of the least demonstrative congregations in which it has been my privilege to worship. This congregation took its worship SERIOUSLY. There was a serious issue, discussed in the Worship Committee more than once, about the propriety of clapping during worship. To clap or not to clap? That was the question. The general rule was, “If in doubt, don’t.”

And it wasn’t just about clapping. During a one-on-one conversation, a conflicted member confided to me: “You make me laugh at least twice during every one of your sermons; but now I choke the laughter back, because nobody around me is laughing. I don’t know whether I’m a little ‘off’ or whether they just don’t get it. Not wanting to disturb the worship of my neighbors, I now laugh to myself.”

Clapping and laughter during worship don’t seem to be at issue here at Salem. But there is the issue of the congregational Amen. In earlier hymnals, there was an Amen at the conclusion of every hymn. In our present

hymnal, Amen is omitted. I asked our music director, Bob Meinz, why.

Like United Methodists, the Congregational Christian Churches hold an annual meeting, only theirs is national, not regional. In 1994 the meeting was held in Des Moines, and it marked the 40th anniversary of the Missionary Society—the Congregational counterpart to our Board of Global Ministries. As it happened, I was chairing the Missionary Society that year. We decided to make a big deal of the anniversary. As a part of the celebration we commissioned a blind composer-performer from Grand Rapids, named Ken Medema, to create special music for the occasion. I still remember the theme song, “Bound together and Finely Woven in Love.” Ken Medema taught us that an excellent worship director can loosen up the most stoic of congregations. Now, that gathering was comprised of a large majority of “blue hairs and no hairs,” if you catch my drift. It was a stodgy assemblage. But within two minutes, Medema had them laughing, crying, dancing in the aisles, and hugging total strangers!

Anyhow, the celebration in Des Moines included the reading of a narration of the accomplishments of the Missionary Society with a musical accompaniment. With it we had an “Amen” chorus composed of Missionary Society members and others we had conscripted from the audience. Every time we needed an Amen, the chorus would shout: YEAH! THAT’S WHAT I SAY!!;” and the audience echoed . . . “YEAH!! THAT’S WHAT I SAY!!” Those moments of celebration may have more clearly mirrored worship in heaven than anything I had experienced to that point in my life.

All this brings me now to a consideration of our text for the morning in Revelation 7, where worship in heaven is in progress, and everybody surrounds the throne of God with loud Amens. I should first set the scene by recalling what lies just before the beginning of our text. The four angels who hold back to four winds are admonished against harming the earth, the sea, or trees until all the saints are sealed—all 144,000 thousand of them—12,000 from each of the 12 tribes: a perfect and complete

number, meaning symbolically that EVERYBODY'S there! Twelve thousand from the tribes of each of Jacob's twelve sons:

Judah	Naphtali	Issachar
Reuben	Manasseh	Zebulun
Gad	Simeon	(the lost tribe of Joseph)
Asher	Levi	Benjamin

Scattered Israel is gathered at last—brought to wholeness, completion, "salvation!"

Literalists who insist that only 144,000 will enter heaven miss the point AGAIN! Why would a loving, merciful, and inclusive God save only 12,000 from ANY tribe, ancient or modern? Are only 12,000 Baptists worth saving? Only 12,000 Roman Catholics or Presbyterians or Episcopalians or United Methodists worth saving? No! The message of Revelation is that NOT ONE OF GOD'S SAINTS WILL BE LOST.

Lest anyone continue to suffer under the misapprehension that ONLY 12,000 will be saved, read verse 9 from Revelation 7, where there is gathered a great multitude, which no one can number, from every nation, tribe,

people, and tongue. Among this throng there are those clad in white robes. Who are they? That's the very question the master of ceremonies asks in ritual fashion. It's a rhetorical question; and the answer is, "Sir, you know." And we do know, of course, for suddenly we realize this is a confirmation service, in which God's great YES, God's great AMEN is pronounced over them!

And who is being confirmed? The martyrs whose own blood stains have been washed clean in the blood of the Lamb! The slain and resurrected Jesus is God's great YES pronounced over all who have suffered and died with him and in him. Revelation's triumphant AMEN echoes that of St. Paul, uttered many years earlier. Accused of vacillating on his promises, Paul thunders:

Do I make my plans like a worldly man, ready to say Yes and No at once? As surely as God is faithful, our word to you have not been Yes and No. For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, whom we . . . always Yes. For all the promises of God find their Yes in him.

*That is why we utter the **Amen** through him to the glory of God. (II Cor. 1:17-20)*

All the promises of God find their AMEN in him. Jesus paid for those promises with his life. Christian worship, therefore, is positive, upbeat. It is always YES! AMEN? AMEN! There is, in our worship, no trace of vacillation; no hint of ambivalence; no Yes and No; no tentative proclamation. We do not sound an uncertain trumpet. We know what we are talking about!

Now, I know there are toadies around. Always there are people who will go along to get along; the "me too" people who say AMEN to everything the leader says. We don't have many of those at Salem! What we do have is wonderful congregation of individuals who know the Lord and trust his promises.

Our AMEN comes rumbling out from deep down. It comes out of our tribulations. It is uttered by those who have been over the road, down the valley of the shadow of death, through the deep water, who have had their robes bleached white in the blood of the Lamb.

Our AMEN is anchored in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Christ, whose story can be told in one minute, but not exhausted in a millennium.

It's too bad, in a way, that our worship is so controlled by the clock. The United Methodist God leaves the building after the first sixty minutes! The first time I was a guest in this pulpit, in 2011, before being appointed, there was a lot of preliminary "stuff" in the second service. I was preaching away, glanced up at the clock, saw it was straight up 12 noon, and stopped preaching in mid-sentence. Bob Mainz remonstrated with me for cutting it short. "You were just getting to the best part!" he said.

There is a time to cut straight to the point, bag the verbiage, and go for the sale. But sometimes we need to stay with the story, to let it marinate inside us. There is another way that belongs largely now to another time (although it still flourishes in the Black church) when there was time for the story to unfold, when the listener savored the little embellishments and the lengthy excursions

down verbal rabbit trails, because there existed the luscious luxury of leisure. There was time to explore, time to tease, to lure, to evoke the imagination. There was no rush (take your time, preacher) because time was not something to be exploited or made the most of, but to be shared.

Perhaps what those old spellbinders of another day gave us was not prolix prose, but a narrative polished almost to poetry. They knew, better than we have yet learned, that many words are a vacuous substitute for just the right word. And they knew, too, the power of story and THE STORY—that if you have nothing to say, it doesn't matter much how you say it. But if you've got a story to tell, even the poor telling of it can't completely cripple it. And a great story well told has transformative power. So here's to a time that was, to all who remember and hanker after that time, and to a time again sometime when we will share time and story in a manner which evokes a glad AMEN in the congregation that is echoed in heaven.

Many years ago Sidney Poitier starred in a movie called, "Lilies of the Field." He is an itinerant carpenter, like Jesus. He's something of a drifter, who makes an unplanned stop at a convent somewhere in the desert southwest. The place is going to wrack and ruin; the nuns have been praying for help and consider Poitier, the carpenter, God's answer to their prayers. A very manipulative mother superior persuades him to stay, then cons him into remaining to do more projects—except he is not kept there totally against his will. Poitier is a young, ANGRY Black man; but his anger is held in tension by his great, deep, and abiding need to belong to a community.

Gradually he and the nuns learn to respect one another, then to like one another, then to love each other. Finally, he saves them, and they save him. Along the way he teaches them a song which tells in a simple way the great story of our faith—a song we learned with them. It touched our hearts and stuck to our ribs. It is called "Amen." AMEN, AMEN, AMEN, AMEN, AMEN (sing it over)

See the baby (Amen)
Sleepin' in the manger (Amen)
On Christmas mornin' (AMEN, AMEN, AMEN!)

2. See him in the temple (Amen)
Talkin' with the elders (Amen)
Who marveled at his wisdom (AMEN, AMEN,
AMEN!)

3. See him at the seaside (Amen)
Talkin; with the fishermen (Amen)
And makin' 'em disciples (AMEN, AMEN,
AMEN!)

4. See him on the mountain (Amen)
Preachin' to the people (Amen)
Convertin' all sinners (AMEN, AMEN, AMEN!)

5. See him in the Garden (AMEN)
Prayin' to his Father (AMEN)
In deepest sorrow (AMEN, AMEN, AMEN!)

6. Brought before Pilate (Amen)
Then they crucified him (Amen)
But he rose on Easter! (AMEN, AMEN,
AMEN!)

7. Hallelujah! (Amen)
He died to save us (Amen)
And he lives forever! (AMEN, AMEN, AMEN!)

YEAH!! THAT'S WHAT I SAY!!

What do **YOU** say? (. . . And the congregation
said . . . **AMEN!**)

