

“Stop What You’re Doing and Come Up Here!”

John 2:13-25

Revelation 4:1-11

Pretty early on in the movie “Talladega Nights,” the main character sits down to a meal with his family and says grace. He starts out: “Dear Lord Baby Jesus...” and proceeds to pray. But whereas we so often pray “Our Father,” “Almighty God,” or “Loving Savior,” he keeps coming back to “Dear Tiny Jesus in your golden fleece diapers with your tiny, little fat balled up fists.” Before too long, his wife gets annoyed and says, “Hey, umm...you know, sweetie, Jesus did grow up. You don’t always have to call him baby. It’s a bit odd and off puttin’ to pray to a baby.” But the main character says, “Well, look, I like Christmas Jesus best when I’m sayin’ grace. When you say grace, you can say it to Grown-up Jesus, or Teenage Jesus, or Bearded Jesus, or whoever you want.” So he doubles down and keeps praying to “Baby God.” Then other folks around the table start piping in that they, “like to picture Jesus in a Tuxedo T-shirt” or “with giant eagles’ wings and singin’ lead vocals for Lynyrd Skynrd.”ⁱ

Maybe we all do this...well, not quite this, but something like this. We imagine that Jesus is all and only who we want him to be and just kind of glide past the details we don’t like. The story of Jesus driving the money changers from the Temple is a good example of this. It seems like the folks who love to tell this story the most are the ones who love to be confrontational, whether for good or for ill. They point to their anger or their passion and say, “Jesus was just like me!” He got in peoples’ faces! He upset the status quo! He wouldn’t take anything lying down and neither will I! But this same Jesus did not make war on humanity. When people asked him how on earth he could justify stirring up trouble in the Temple courtyard, he told them, “destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” When he was asked what gave him the authority to challenge injustice, he said he would be killed and rise

again. He didn't continually go on the attack and feed his anger – he laid down his life so that he could take it up again. Jesus's answer to the fight against evil was to be stripped of all his power, all his social standing, all his comfort, his very life breath – he became vulnerable so that we could be made whole. That's hard to wrap our minds around. It's so much easier to pick and choose.

Then, we join John of Patmos, having a vision of heaven. His spirit is invited through a door to witness the awesome splendor of the throne room of Christ. Here, we see illuminated another side of Jesus – not the baby or the struggling prophet and teacher, but the glorified Christ on his throne. The thing about throne rooms is that every detail of them is meant to tell you something about the one in power. They are often filled with the most valuable and beautiful things of any given culture to convey the great importance of the one seated on the throne, which, in turn, tells a visitor something about the strength of the ruler's people.

There is a lot in the book of Revelation that is deeply symbolic – a lot of things that, after so many years, we're not exactly sure what they mean. Quite often, we look at the 24 elders and think of the 12 tribes of Israel and the 12 apostles. The one seated on the throne unites them as saints in heaven, serving one God. The crowns they wear aren't the crowns of kings, passed down from generation to generation. They are the kind of crowns won at the end of a race or other sport. These are like gold medals awarded for people who worked hard and won victory.

Then we meet the four living creatures who are full of eyes – they see everything, they miss nothing. It's a little bit harder to figure out who these creatures are and what they might symbolize. Why a lion, a calf, a human, and a flying eagle? Since there are four of them, many different Christian thinkers have thought they referred to the four gospels, assigning different creatures to different gospels. They stand with Christ and represent him to all the world.

These creatures are thought to be cherubim, a special class of angels who guard. Well, we know that Jesus doesn't need to be guarded from anybody up in heaven. But we see that these creatures lead worship in heaven and the elders cast down their crowns in response. Any glory and honor they have in heaven is nothing next to the glory of God that shines from the throne.

So, as we think about these creatures and remember that everything and everyone in a throne tells us about the one seated on the throne, what might they be teaching us? Irenaeus was a Greek bishop in the late 2nd century.ⁱⁱ He thought that the creatures surrounded the throne because they wanted us to see Christ's life of salvation in full view. First, the creature that looks like a person reminds us to think of Jesus's incarnation. I guess this would include tiny baby Jesus, but it goes beyond this to show us all the ways that Christ wrestled with the pains and uncertainties of life just as we do. He faced sin, he faced loss, he made choices that his family and friends didn't understand. But God Immanuel – Christ who walks among us also means that our bodies are blessed. Just as Christ blessed the waters of the earth when he was baptized, so did he bless each and every body when he walked among us. He felt for us deeply and embraced us fully.ⁱⁱⁱ

Then the lion reminds us that Christ is courageous – that he is the one who won victory for us. He did charge into the Temple courtyard to drive out those who would take advantage of others. He did challenge people in power who hurt others and he called out the rationalizations that we each use to hurt each other and hurt ourselves. He did stand strong enough to go to Jerusalem, knowing what he would face, knowing what this victory would mean for all of humanity, knowing that it would feel like forsakenness.^{iv}

And so the calf reminds us that he made himself a sacrifice for us. He was led to the slaughter. He didn't lift his voice or his hand to stop it. He made himself small for our sake. He

became the bread of the world and the cup of salvation because we need him more than we'll ever know. He made a way through his body that holds space for all humanity.^v

Finally, the eagle reveals Christ as the one who ascended into heaven – who is also truly, fully God. Though he could have flown from this world at any time, though he could have snapped his fingers and changed everything, instead he chose us and our whole hearts. The Living God does not override free will or force us to obey. The Living God glides and soars from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven so that we may learn in our own time what it is to be fully human, to see who God is and what God wants from us, to be changed day by day into children of light. Christ did not come to earth to limit us to worldly bounds; he came to earth to lift us to heaven so that we might one day come to be infinite.^{vi}

The human one, the lion, the calf, and the eagle – just as they lead worship in heaven, they call us to worship in our hearts. Are we strong enough to praise Christ in his humanity, in his power, in his sacrifice, and in his divinity – all at the same time? Are we humble enough to cast down whatever earthly crowns we have hoped to gain to lift up this mysterious stranger, this beloved brother, this savior of our souls, and king of our hearts? Here, in the great throne room, it is enough for us to marvel in wonder. Here, it is enough to say, “Hallelujah!” “You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power.” May we each day join this happy chorus. Amen.

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https://wikileaks.org/sony/docs/03_03/Mktrsch/Market%20Research/Scripts/Released/TALLADEGA%20NIGHTS%2005-05-05%20DO%20NOT%20GIVE%20OUT.pdf

ii <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Irenaeus>

iii <https://upperroommedia.org/blog/2019/07/23/who-are-the-four-living-creatures>

iv Ibid.

v Ibid.

vi Ibid.