The great drama of the trinitarian hymn “Holy, Holy, Holy”

The beloved song can contain God’s glory no more than the scripture it’s based on.

Sunday's Coming Premium
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Why do we sing as part of worship? The answer is not abstract or theoretical. It is given through the practice of singing the songs themselves. The defining practices of the Christian community and the defining nature of our humanness as expressed in the presence of God can be found in the sequence of Psalms 104, 105, 106, and 107.

- Psalm 104 displays the practice of wonder and awe that issues in exuberant praise.
- Psalm 105 displays the act of remembering God's good actions that move us to glad obedience.
- Psalm 106 displays the act of remembering our own waywardness that situates us honestly in our need and hope for God's rescue.
- Psalm 107 displays the act of gratitude that specifically names the occasions of God's transformative fidelity and our response with material gratitude.

The four liturgic actions—praise, readiness for obedience, readiness for rescue, and thanks (to which other like actions can be readily added)—together constitute a rendering of humanness as it is given in the biblical tradition and as it may be performed in worship.

These dimensions of humanness, which are embraced as they are performed, amount to a world of gift that refuses the more conventional and pervasive world of commodity. The momentary departure from the world of commodity in worship requires a practice of imagination and emotional emancipation that together defy the tight calculus of market ideology. They also defy the kind of reasoned talk in which many Christians are wont to engage in worship. Singing is artistry that entails a kind of freedom that resists analytic control. Singing is, by the way of the world, quite unreasonable, and bears witness to an alternative reality.

Thus, an answer to "Why do we sing?" is that in singing we may evidence and enact our God-given humanness, which is marked by bodily freedom, by uncensored articulation, and by full-person engagement. Israel has known this in its dancing and singing since Miriam defied Pharaoh (see Exod. 15:20–21). The early church knew this in Pentecost, which made imperial magistrates nervous (see Acts 16:25–34). Martin Luther knew this as he exposited the grace of God—he knew that such grace must be sung. Martin Luther King Jr., kneeling before sheriffs, knew that singing counters intimidation and evokes courage. And we know it in the late days of capitalism, which wants to cover over bodily humanity (with its wounds and possibilities) by the offer of religious kitsch.

The "why" of our hymn singing is enhanced by the "what" of our singing. Hymnals are amazing treasures of generative, imaginative renditions of faithfulness. One enduring hymn from the early 19th century is "Holy, Holy, Holy," with a text by the Anglican poet and bishop Reginald Heber and a tune by John B. Dykes. This stately,

regal hymn voices a dimension of gospel faith that is almost lost in the sweet romanticism of much recent church music. In a frightened, lonely culture of alienation like ours, the accent of much current church music concerns intimate one-on-one contact with God. The lyrics and the music together offer intimacy with God. In the midst of such music, this hymn stands as a mighty insistence that the reality of God cannot be reduced to comfortable, reassuring companionship. The hymn insists that the God the church worships is an awesome sovereign to whom willing yielding is appropriate.

In current church usage, the hymn is regularly linked to the celebration of Trinity Sunday, as the hymn quite intentionally asserts that distinct formulation of God in the full majesty of mystery. The threefold “holy” is taken as an allusion to the three persons of the Trinity. That is a legitimate ecclesial extrapolation, even though in the biblical texts that evoked the hymn (Rev. 4:6–11 and Isa. 6:1–8) there is no appeal to trinitarian categories. The threefold “holy” in these texts, rather, is a rhetorical extravagance and a linguistic superlative to voice the awesome wonder of the sovereign God.

Revelation 4 offers a vision of “living creatures” and elders all gathered in doxology around the heavenly throne singing, “Holy, holy, holy, the Lord God the Almighty, who was and is and is to come. . . . You are worthy, 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.” This vision anticipates a world to come that is an alternative to the present brutalizing world of Roman imperialism. The hymn of the “living creatures,” like all of the book of Revelation, does not doubt that God will eventually prevail over the empire of force. It does not doubt, moreover, that the faithful who trust the gospel will end in doxological joy at God’s prevailing after they have endured the suffering imposed by the present empire. Thus, the doxology is an anticipatory celebration of God’s sure and certain victory over historical evil.

The God who is celebrated is the nearly unutterable creator God who created all things, who “calls into existence things that do not exist” (Rom. 4:17), and who is before all created time, after all created time, and governor of all created time. From its outset the church, after the manner of Israel, has known that such an unutterable claim for God can only be expressed in poetic, doxological cadence. It is most unfortunate that the doxological, poetic formulation of the Trinity, “God in three persons,” has often been reduced from poetic liturgical formulation to a propositional claim that pretends it can be parsed in conventional human rationality.

The purpose of doxology is to defy such explanatory reasoning, which is why at its best the church sings rather than reasons or disputes.

The threefold “holy” in Revelation 4 is undoubtedly derived from Isaiah 6. That text narrates a tumultuous experience of the prophet Isaiah in Jerusalem: the prophet has a vision of the awesome sovereign God and in response accepts the burdensome assignment of a prophetic vocation. The vision Isaiah narrates is of YHWH as king, high and lofty in the heavenly throne room where the “living creatures” of Revelation, winged creatures (seraphim and cherubim) swarm around the throne of God in unending doxology. They cover their faces with two wings because they dare not see the Holy One. Their song is the threefold “holy” echoed in Revelation and in Heber’s hymn: “Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory” (Isa. 6:3).

The temple cannot contain the divine glory that spills over throughout all creation. The prophet’s response to this vision of God is an awareness of his own sinful unworthiness, his ritual uncleanness before holiness. Isaiah is startled beyond explanation that in his disqualification he nonetheless can receive this vision of the holy God. More than a vision, this holy God, via the ministry of the winged creatures, removes his guilt and blots out his sin. It is astonishing that the Holy One will invest in pardon! Isaiah’s response to this wonder is readiness to be dispatched on behalf of this three-times-holy God.

It is worth notice that the lines that follow in Isaiah 6 are most often not mentioned or quoted in church, because they are hard words in which the holy God provides that Israel, in its recalcitrance, will not be able to “comprehend,” understand, or “turn and be healed” (vv. 9–10). The people of God are to be subjected to profound judgment; that is the burden of the prophetic vocation of Isaiah. While we regularly choose to disregard this note (as does Revelation), it is important to notice that the New Testament repeatedly cites this text as a judgment on Israel, which we can readily extend to the church (Matt. 13:14–15; Mark 4:12; Luke 8:10; John 12:37–43; Acts 28:26–27; Rom. 11:7). In Isaiah 6, the vision of God’s holiness is awesome, but it is also ominous, thus precluding any easy intimacy that we would much prefer.

Already in its first verse, the hymn moves beyond Isaiah and Revelation to situate our singing in the doctrinal formulation of Nicaea:

Holy, holy, holy! Lord God Almighty!
Early in the morning our song shall rise to thee.
Holy, holy, holy! Merciful and mighty!
God in three Persons, blessed Trinity!

The opening “Lord God Almighty” is a faithful echo of Isaiah’s attestation that he had “seen the King, the Lord of Hosts” (6:5). The “hosts” that surround the king are the “living creatures,” the angels and minigods, including the seraphim and cherubim. Since the throne room is peopled in the vision by a great doxological company, it is not a big leap to imagine this three-fold emergence of the divine presence. This is no one-dimensional monarch but a great company of agents.

The presiding king is recognized as “merciful and mighty.” These two themes together stretch the rich complexity of God’s capacity: might that bespeaks sovereign authority that will not be mocked, on the one hand, and mercy that opens divine majesty to gracious mutuality, on the other hand.

The two themes map out Israel’s history of *exile and restoration* and reappear in the Jesus narrative as *crucifixion and resurrection*. They come to constitute recurring realities in the life of God, even though we have a great propensity to prefer one of them to the other.

It is precisely this tension between might and mercy that keeps the future open. It is no wonder then that early in the hymn we affirm that we will sing praise to this God at the break of sunlight, just as morning has broken. The wonder of this three-times-holy God of might and mercy does not invite explanation. Rather, it evokes doxology that must begin promptly as we awaken. The hymn thus performs, in our mouths, the very act that it describes. We sing about praise at daybreak as we ourselves sing praise at daybreak.

The second verse attests the God who persists in might and mercy in all times, before time and after time, thus enveloping our modest historical moments of hope and fear:

Holy, holy, holy! all the saints adore thee,
casting down their golden crowns around the glassy sea;
cherubim and seraphim falling down before thee,

who wert, and art, and evermore shalt be.

The wonder of such an engaged ultimacy (engaged in great acts of sustenance, impingement, and restoration) makes praise the only appropriate response, a glad acknowledgment of this reality that defies our critical capacity for explanation. The doxological drama unfolds in heaven (the venue of the gods) as well as on earth, where we reiterate the scene from the throne room of heaven.

The doxological scene has among its glad participants “all the saints” who willingly forego their own crowns of victory, virtue, and achievement (Rev. 4:10). There is no reluctance among the saints to yield their largest claims, for the vision of God overwhelms. Alongside the saints—those who have suffered greatly at the hands of the empire for their confession and who are now validated—is the thronging company of the throne room who attend to God, as we have seen in Isaiah’s vision (seraphim and cherubim). In our singing we participate in the glorious drama along with God’s more immediate attendants. The scene is one of unmitigated joy in celebration of the King-God who has defeated the powers of evil and who offers a new regime of glad well-being.

The hymn’s third verse further exposits this celebrated Lord of might and mercy with a formula of incomparability:

> Holy, holy, holy! though the darkness hide thee,
> though the eye of sinfulness thy glory may not see,
> only thou art holy; there is none beside thee,
> perfect in power, in love and purity.

The formula, “there is none beside thee,” allows that there are other gods round about, but none of them can compare to this practitioner of might and mercy. There is no one like this God, no rival, no alternative, no better offer—a formula often reiterated in the Bible.

The incomparability of YHWH, the hymn attests, is in the combination of power, love, and purity. Of these three terms, the first two reiterate “merciful and mighty.” The third term is a fresh note that reflects the unqualified innocence and purity of the saints in Revelation whose lives have been purged by suffering. Or it reflects the action of the seraphim in the Isaiah vision who dealt decisively with the prophet’s disqualifying uncleanness and rendered him pure, fit to be in God’s presence. It

could be, improbably, that there is somewhere a god of power or even a god of love, or perhaps a god of purity. There is, however, none like YHWH, who combines in his character these three features in a dramatic and effective way that makes our life with God possible and joyous.

In singing “Holy, holy, holy,” we perform the act of praise that the text describes.

Although there is nothing in Revelation about either the elders or the living creatures being sinful, this verse recognizes the profound and unbridgeable distance between God and the worshipers—a distance that may have two different justifications. First, God may be hidden from us because sin has disabled our eyes and skewed our vision, keeping God hidden from us. In Isaiah, however, the text allows otherwise. The prophet in astonishment acknowledges that even though he and his people were “unclean” (ritually unqualified), “[his] eyes have seen” (Isa. 6:5). In that moment God is willing to overcome his ritual disqualification so that Isaiah may indeed see God.

A second possibility is that the “darkness” that hides God in this verse of the hymn is a liturgical arrangement that precludes inordinate access to God, precludes in order to maintain divine awe or perhaps to protect worshipers from the danger of direct access. The sequence of words suggests that it is God’s incomparability that is the ground of hiddenness.

I suggest that the hymn leaves the issue open, even as scripture is ambiguous and unsettled on the question. It is the propensity of much interpretation to imagine that it is only our obstinacy that blocks our vision of God. The third verse allows for that understanding. But it could be that the root reality is not in our failure but in God’s singularity, which does not intend to be fully on exhibit. Thus, God asserts to Moses that seeing God is too risky: “You cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live” (Exod. 33:20). Even in that encounter, however, the fact of God’s hiddenness does not preclude God’s mercy: “I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy” (Exod. 33:19). The juxtaposition of verses 19 and 20 suggests that divine hiddenness maintains God’s freedom to act as God will, even in mercy. Thus, we are back to the hymn’s double claim of might and mercy, power and love, hiddenness and accessibility. This ambiguous divine reality is only recognized in wonder that evokes eager praise.

The fourth verse reiterates much of what we have already sung:

> Holy, holy, holy! Lord God Almighty!
> All thy works shall praise thy name, in earth and sky and sea;
> Holy, holy, holy! Merciful and mighty!
> God in three Persons, blessed Trinity!

We do find here, however, one new accent: that “all thy works shall praise thy name.” These works (creatures?) are inhabitants of “earth and sky and sea,” that is, the totality of all that is. The triad reflects the ancient three-story universe, but the list bespeaks comprehensiveness, no creature left behind. There is no creature who will not praise.

In this liturgical act, God the creator will gladly acknowledge a responsive, dependent relationship of all creatures to the creator. The appropriate stance of all creatures, from lowly radish and slippery eel to the ones “in the image of God,” is one of doxology.

That all creatures will join in praise is already celebrated in such psalms as Psalm 148:

> Praise the Lord from the earth, you sea monsters and all deeps, fire and hail, snow and frost, stormy wind fulfilling his command! Mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars! Wild animals and all cattle, creeping things and flying birds! Kings of the earth and all peoples, princes and all rulers of the earth! Young men and women alike, old and young together! Let them praise the name of the Lord (vv. 7–13a).

The awareness that all such creatures stand alongside us in glad doxology might rescue us from the flat view of modernity that creaturely reality is only a material phenomenon for us to use, enjoy, and exploit. To the contrary, every element is a doxological creature who sings with us.

As in Psalm 148, our hymn concerns God’s name—that is, God’s identity and reputation: “Let them praise the name of the Lord, for his name alone is exalted” (Ps. 148:13). In the book of Amos, God’s name is “Lord of hosts,” which means the sovereign and commander of the whole company of angels, the stars, and all living creatures (see Amos 4:13; 5:8–9; 9:5–6). That such creatures join in praise reflects a conviction that there are no inanimate or subcovenantal creatures; it is all

relationality and mutuality among willing partners who gladly celebrate a defining dependence on and grateful responsiveness to the creator God.

Thus, the hymn boldly links the mystery of the Trinity to all, even the lowliest creaturely species. With an appeal to Dante's *Divine Comedy*, David Hardy and David Ford conclude their book *Praising and Knowing God* with these words: "This sees praise and adoration of God, and in appropriate ways of people, as the essence of every person's vocation. . . . What was the positive contribution of the doctrine of the Trinity? Praise is, among other things, a form of thinking, and aims to 'think God' as adequately as possible."

This claim takes our breath away, because it contradicts all of our ordinary thinking. It offers a vast vista of the world responding to God in acknowledgment of its true status before God. Such a way of thinking (and singing) refuses the reductionist imagination that seeks to control rather than to yield gladly. It also exposes the tackiness of church music that is privatized and domesticated so as to resist the great drama in which we are situated among God's glad and grateful creatures.