

START AT THE ENDING: THE BOOK OF REVELATION

Hymns of Dissent

Revelation 4:8-11

January 18, 2026

You feel it before you can name it. You've been there. A song starts in a crowded room, and it pulses in your chest as you hear it in your ears. Tomorrow night, down in Miami, when that fight song breaks out, the air in the room will change, and I won't know the words. I'm forever a Blue Devil. But when in Rome—or in Bloomington—you join the song anyway. We all know that familiar feeling: that rush when a crowd of strangers becomes a single voice. That sense of belonging. What the sociologist Émile Durkheim calls "that collective effervescence." It may not be a sacred moment. But it has its elements.

That's how John experiences heaven. When the door opens, he doesn't enter a muted library or a quiet chapel. It's more like a stadium. And John is the late arrival to an unending worship service. He stands in a cascade of sacred strangeness. Thunder that rattles the floorboards under his feet. Lightning that shears the air in front of him. And in the middle of it all, there is music. It is constant. It is relentless. It is Heaven's chorus, singing without ceasing:

Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come.

We know those words. We sing them here. Perhaps you know them by heart. But be careful. You should know what you're signing up for when you join this choir. Because in Revelation, worship is dissent. These hymns are not lullabies meant to put us to sleep; they are choruses of courage designed to wake us up.

It helps to know that in the first century, music was the connective tissue of the Roman Empire. Every public festival, every royal procession, every athletic contest was punctuated by hymns, hymns to the emperor.

To sing those hymns was to belong to that story. To be a citizen of that realm. To belong to that kingdom. To sing was to belong.

When the creatures in John's vision cry "Holy," they are not giving God a compliment. They are committing treason.

In the Roman Empire, there was only one called "Worthy." His name was Domitian. He sat on a throne of marble. He claimed the title *Kurios Theos*. Lord God. Emperor worship was civil religion. By praising a Jewish peasant who was executed on a Roman cross, the church was engaging in dangerous liturgy, subversive worship. They were refusing to be assimilated to the civil religion of the time. Every note they sang reflected their refusal to bow before an idol. They were saying in their worship that the most powerful man on earth was just a footnote. They belonged to a different story, citizens of another realm, a more permanent kingdom.

This is what the marginalized have always done. When even holy words are coopted, it is music that resists.

I think about the "hush harbors," those secret places deep in the woods of the American South where enslaved people gathered. The system of chattel slavery tried to turn human beings into ledger lines, to crush the soul until all that was left was a body to be used.

But then, late in the night, a song would start. Hymns to reclaim God-given breath. Sometimes they would overturn a large iron wash-pot or sing into a quilt to muffle the sound. They were burying hope like a seed in the ground. They were constructing walls of dignity from sound in a frequency the Empire could not hear.

Those songs marched out of the fields and into the streets. In 1963, when Fannie Lou Hamer was beaten in a Mississippi jail cell—bleeding, exhausted, her body broken—she didn't give a speech. She didn't draft a statement. In her cell, she sang "This Little Light of Mine." Inmates in nearby cells joined the song.

Tyrants are not afraid of armies; they command larger ones. They fear anyone who keeps singing of a Savior, because you can lock the body in a cell in Winona, Mississippi, or Birmingham, Alabama. You can exile it on the Isle of Patmos. But you cannot handcuff a melody; it spreads like wildfire. When all else fails, the song persists.

I have witnessed widows standing at their husband's gravesides, hearts shattered, voices shaking—and they sing anyway. Their song is a defiant declaration to death itself: "You may have taken his breath, but you will not take the victory song." I have heard the voices of men singing hymns before dawn at the shelter, lifting their own voices against the words of the world—words like worthless, dirty, bum, dangerous. Words to reclaim dignity. I've witnessed teenagers, arm in arm, singing and sobbing outside school buildings, while the police lights still flash.

Empire is a kind of shapeshifter. If it cannot break your body, it will try to steal your song. It will pipe its anthems of fear into your ears until you forget you ever knew another tune. It will convince you of its own inevitability, that the world is governed by force and you might as well get used to it. It's just the way things are, have always been.

Too often the church blends right in. Too often, we stay silent when neighbors are targeted because we don't want to be "political." We trade the choir for the comment section. We mistake cruelty for strength and mercy for weakness. We choose our comfort over courage.

But these compromises have consequences too. Because we become what we worship. If you bow to the beast, you begin to reflect its monstrous instincts and destructive ways. Howard Thurman—whose work shaped the mind of a young Martin Luther King Jr.—put it this way: "As a

Christian, I must see to it that what I condemn in society, I do not permit to grow in me."

Listen. The first Christians weren't persecuted for worshiping Jesus—Rome could make room for that. They were persecuted for refusing to bow before Caesar. Come what may, they could not do it. The faith that had taken root in them was too strong to allow them to bow before idols. And neither can we. We cannot sing praise to God on Sunday and make peace with hatred on Monday.

Because that is how we lose our souls.

Thank God there is another way.

We gather in this room not to escape from the world but to remember which world we call home. Every Sunday is a rehearsal. We practice the language of the Kingdom so that tomorrow morning, when the world demands we sing its song of bitterness, we have another one ready in our lungs.

That is what Revelation is: a gift of clarity. When John enters Heaven's throne room, he does not leave the earth behind; he sees it for what it is. With its marble thrones, its overwhelming power, its fear and contempt—it's all smoke. Vapor. Temporary shadows of a passing world. John insists the song we sing is the only thing that is real. It was here before the first stone of Rome was laid and will be here when the last monument to tyranny has crumbled into the sea.

And yet. Not all who claim the name of Jesus are singing his song.

Some loud and insistent voices are teaching another tune. Their liturgy confuses the throne room of Heaven with the halls of human power. They've made the gospel sound like it's a march to conquest—and dare call it gospel. They're writing bills, shaping curriculum, revising history, catechizing a generation that the kingdom of God looks like the triumph of a tribe. That holy means powerful. That blessed means winning. That it's the church's job to dominate.

But that's not our faith. It is only the empire in church clothes.

We have to be honest about this: our children are being catechized. Every single day. Every screen. Every algorithm. Every angry voice claiming to speak for Jesus is teaching them a song. The question is whether they'll learn this one first. Whether they learn the melody of mercy before they're handed the drumbeat of domination.

That is what's at stake in this room. That is what we are doing when we sing.

I imagine you are weary. Me, too. I imagine that some of you may have come here today wondering if this hour could be anything more than a brief reprieve from a world that doesn't care what we sing. You might feel like you don't have a single note left in you.

I need you to hear this: that is exactly when the song matters most.

It occurs to me that the powers of this world can handle our anger. In fact, they are calibrated for it. They know exactly what to do with our rage. Despair feeds the machine. But your God-given joy? Your hymns of unending praise? That witness is ungovernable.

And that is why we sing.

We sing because there is a promise etched into the fabric of creation itself. There is a day coming after this day. That weeping may last for the night, but joy comes in the morning. That the City of God will one day descend and merge with the city of humankind.

So please, church—do not stop singing.

Sing because the widow at the graveside knows a courage the power-hungry cannot fathom.

Sing because the saints sang through their darkest nights and left the melody behind for you.

Sing because the children sitting in these pews are watching you right now, and they desperately need

to learn hope's tune before the world teaches them something else.

I think the powers of this age want us to forget there was ever another melody. I think they are determined to invade your imagination and convince you the way things are is the only way they could be, that the future belongs to the most ruthless.

But I trust that because you have stood in this room, you have felt the beat of a deeper truth. I trust that because you have been in this space, you have seen the glow of a brighter light. And you now know the truth. You know this secret.

The Empire is loud because it is terrified. It is desperate, and it is dying. As for the song, it does not need to shout. It does not need to coerce. It does not need a pageant of human power. It is the heartbeat of a God who will not be silenced. It is the promise of a Lord whose law is love. It is the only thing that lasts. It has already won.

So, do not let anyone steal your song. Do not let anyone turn your mercy to rage.

Go with music in your heart no power can crush. Keep singing the world to come.

Amen.