

Sermon: The Power of Praise
 First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
 4/7/13

Revelation 1:4-8

John to the seven churches that are in Asia:

Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, 5 and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.

To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, 6 and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

7 Look! He is coming with the clouds;
 every eye will see him,
 even those who pierced him;
 and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail.
 So it is to be. Amen.

8 "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.

TRYING TIMES

Thomas Paine wrote during the dark days of the Revolutionary War, "These are the times that try men's souls."

The book of Revelation was written during such a time. One commentator said that the church was "clinging for its life on the fringes of the Roman Empire."

The church in those early years did not have any political clout. Christians were portrayed as religious zealots and enemies of the state.

Let me explain. The Romans held their empire together by forcing subjects to take an oath of allegiance to Caesar. They were required to say, "Caesar is Lord." In other words the Empire required people to say that Caesar was a god.

Now in a world that believed in many gods for most people this wasn't a big problem. They believed in many gods. Adding one more wasn't a big deal.

But, it was a big deal for Christians. They would not say, "Caesar is Lord." Instead they said, "Jesus is Lord." And that got them into big trouble with the State.

When Christians refused to take that oath, when they refused to say Caesar is Lord, it was like refusing to say the pledge of allegiance. Those who would not take that oath were thought to be unpatriotic and perhaps dangerous.

Refusing to say Caesar is Lord came with a high price tag. Christians were relentlessly persecuted and some were even martyred for their faith. It looked like the Empire might even destroy the Church.

How could they respond to such a dire situation? They were so small, and their problems were so large.

THE SONG OF PATMOS

The answer came from a man who was himself a prisoner on the isle of Patmos.

According to an ancient Roman historian, Patmos was a dreaded island prison. We might compare it to our Alcatraz. Patmos was the final stop for political troublemakers. No one ever came back from Patmos.

John was a man who refused to say, “Caesar is Lord,” and because of that his life was ruined, or so it seemed. But, God chose to give John and his people hope in this most unlikely place.

Salvation did not come in the form of a political or military victory. Salvation came in the form of a vision.

Revelation is a hymn of praise sung in the midst of despair. In fact our lesson for today is probably an early Christian hymn or snippets from several early hymns.

Think of that. Your world is falling apart and how does God respond?

He gives you some new hymns to sing.

How utterly useless that seems against the might of the Empire.

And yet, the history of the church proves that singing in the face of difficulty can have a miraculous effect.

SONGS OF GRACE

When John Wesley began his ministry in 18th century England, the social problems seemed overwhelming. The gin trade had led to huge problems with alcoholism.

The industrial revolution had laid waste to the rural countryside. Many people had come to the cities seeking employment. Child labor was the scourge of the land.

What to do in the face of such problems? Should they start a political action group? Should they develop programs to help the poor?

Wesley took a different approach. He began a revival, which, in the words of British theologian David Ford, “responded to the problems of the day with an overwhelming affirmation of Divine grace.”

And a big part of that revival was the singing of hymns, really good hymns, hymns that were filled with sound theology.

Look through the hymnal some time and see just how many of our beloved old hymns were written by one of the Wesley brothers. Hark the Herald Angels Sing, O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing, and Love Divine All Loves Excelling were written in a time and place that tried the souls of men, women and children.

PROTEST SONGS

Some might say that this was an unrealistic way to respond to such great problems. After all, do hymns put food on the table? What good did the hymns of Charles Wesley do for England?

For that matter what good did the hymns of Revelation do for people being persecuted by the Roman Empire?

Some might say that this is what’s wrong with the church. We sing when we should be working for real change in a broken world.

Or maybe, just maybe this is where real change begins.

The hymns of faith are protest songs. The hymns of faith enable us to see a new world coming.

The hymns of faith help us follow the advice of the apostle Paul, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.” (Romans 12:2)

What the beleaguered Christians of the early church needed more than anything else was a new song to sing. They needed to be reminded that despite evidence to the contrary God was still in charge of his creation.

The kingdom had already come in Jesus, and no king or kingdom could defeat the King of kings. No earthly kingdom could supplant the Kingdom of the Creator.

Many people expressed their appreciation for the Halleluiah Chorus last Sunday. Why do we love that song? The music is majestic, and the words are the powerful words of Scripture, “King of kings and Lord of lords . . . and He shall reign forever and ever.”

The Revelation is like the Halleluiah Chorus.

God sends us music that challenges the blasphemous claims of the Empire.

And it is this music that lifts us up when we are down.

GOD IN THREE TENSES

Today's lesson begins with a blessing to the churches; "Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come ...". John Ballie entitled a sermon on this passage, "God in Three Tenses."

We can only live in the uncertain present. We cannot change the past, and we cannot know the future.

But, God is not limited in this way. In the book of Hebrews we read, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever." (13:8)

The grace of God is eternal. God reigns forever. God's grace is not limited by time.

And this eternal God is clearly revealed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. This is the God that we trust; this is the God to whom we belong in life and in death.

I BELIEVE

Put yourself in the shoes of those second century Christians who gathered in a secret place to proclaim their allegiance to Christ. Despite the persecution these converts have decided to follow the Way of Jesus.

They have been carefully instructed in the faith and now they come forward to be baptized. Facing the others he proclaims, "I believe in God."

Notice that he doesn't say, "I believe that God exists."

That would be the same thing as saying I believe that democracy exists. We can believe that democracy exists but that does not make us committed to the principles of democracy.

The dictator believes that a thing called democracy exists. But, he doesn't believe in democracy. It is not something that he trusts.

The little word "in" makes all the difference.

When the convert said, "I believe in God" he was saying that the stories of faith were more than just a tale about something that happened long ago. He was saying that those stories of faith are my story as well.

THE SEDER

The best example of this is the Jewish Passover meal, the Seder. In that meal the leader of the ritual, talking about the captivity of God's people in Egypt says, "The Egyptians mistreated us."

To that a child asks, "Why do we say that the Egyptians mistreated us since we were not there?" And the leader replies that we say "us" because if God had not delivered our ancestors from Egypt, we would still be slaves.

The deliverance of God in the past has a present effect. If Christ had not delivered us from our bondage to sin through his death on the cross, we would still be without hope; we would still be slaves to sin.

The Scripture tells us in verse 5 of our lesson that Jesus loves us and has freed us from our sins. God's past actions in Christ have a present consequence. We serve not only the God who was but also the God who is.

God not only sustained and saved His people in the past. God saves and sustains his people today. God not only created the heavens and the earth; God sustains His good creation by his providential care in the present.

SUSTAINED BY THE CREATOR

When we say the Apostle's Creed we say, "I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth."

We don't say, "I believe in the God who once made the heavens and the earth, and then ran off and left them." We believe that the God who made this universe sustains it by His grace.

The Psalmist said that the heavens are telling the glory of God. (Psalm 19:1)

When we are feeling overwhelmed by life perhaps we need to put it all in perspective. Maybe we ought to sing a hymn like "This is My Father's World" and reflect on the enormity of the creation.

I heard an illustration once that helped me put it all in perspective. Look at the ring on your finger. Imagine that the ring on your finger is the orbit of the earth around the sun. Can you do that?

Now, on that scale, the nearest star would be one and a half miles from where you are right now. And most of the heavenly bodies that we see through telescopes would be somewhere in Latin America!

The distance between stars is measure in light years, the closest star being four light years away. Some heavenly bodies are so far away from our planet that the light is just not reaching our planet after traveling for thousands of years.

Now pair that fact with John's vision of the risen Christ. "His hair was a white as wool... and his eyes blazed like fire... He held seven stars in his right hand..." (Revelation 1:16) This is a poetic way of saying that God in Christ holds the entire universe in His hand.

Often we concentrate too much on the losses in our life. Our focus narrows and prevents us from hearing God's promises and receiving God's gracious care.

When problems mount up, it helps to put things in a larger perspective. When we consider the wonder of creation we can sing with the Psalmist, "O Lord, our Lord, how excellent is thy name ... who has set thy glory above the heavens."

Or to put it another way, when problems beset us, we need to look up instead of about.

And we trust our future to God. God is the God who was, who is and who is to come.

THE GOD WHO IS TO COME

Let's think about that last point. God is the God of the future. For us the future is uncertain. That's not so for God. Like the past and the present, the future is in God's hands.

Many of us spend sleepless nights worrying about the future. But, this passage reminds us that we do not have to worry.

The future is in God's hands. Eternity is in God's hands.

The eternal is beyond our ability to understand, but this passage gives us a taste of what we cannot fully know. We get to sing the victory song of the future.

When you read the book of Revelation, don't analyze each point, as you would say one of Paul's letters. Instead, when you read Revelation let the symbols work their way into your heart. It's the difference between reading a novel and listening to music.

Both experiences tell you something but music does it in a more indirect and intuitive way.

Revelation is God's eternal music.

When I think about those times in my life when problems seemed overwhelming, I remember going to worship and praying for strength and guidance. But, in my grief the prayers didn't help. The sermon and the liturgy often left me feeling cold.

But, the hymns of faith always seemed to help. Music, more than anything gave me a sense of hope in uncertain times. One commentator put it this way,

“When we join our voices in one great hymn of praise, then we know, in the very depths of our being that Christ reigns ... that the enemies of God will ultimately be defeated, that good will have the last word over evil.

You know this, not in some rational, intellectual way, but rather in the deepest, most profound depths of your being.”

TWO PLACES AT ONCE

You’ve heard the saying that we can’t be in two places at once. But, the book of Revelation suggests that it is possible to be in two places at once ... in the Spirit.

John is in a terrible island prison, but while there a voice like a trumpet sounds and the Spirit transports him to the very throne of heaven. (Revelation 1:10-20)

And from that perspective John sees things differently. In the midst of struggle John sees a Christ who reigns victorious. John was in jail on Patmos and at the same time “in the spirit.”

I wonder if we need to learn how to be in two places at once. All of us will struggle. All of us will face doubts and fears in life.

Wouldn’t it be wonderful, at least from time to time to be lifted above all that?

A woman’s husband died suddenly. It was a shock to everyone, but at the service the pastor noticed that the widow had a strange look of peace on her face.

He wondered if she was in denial so he made a point to talk with her about it. She said,

“I sat there, even in my grief, and I thought about the life that we had together, all of the great memories that we shared, all of the fun times, and I was transported out of my grief. I suddenly felt gratitude instead of grief.”

She was transported to a place of peace by the grace of God.

Paul told the Philippians that the “peace of God, which surpasses all understanding” would guard their hearts and mind in Christ Jesus.

In other words Paul said that the Philippians could experience a peace that was not based upon their circumstances but instead based upon the promises of God as revealed in Jesus Christ.

A woman once told me that she made it through a terrible time of struggle in her life that lasted for years by focusing on a single verse of Scripture.

“Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on Thee ...” (Isaiah 26:3)

God gave her that verse of Scripture so that she could be in two places at once. It helped her make it through the tough times and trust the Providential care of God.

Now don't misunderstand. This is not easy.

Even the most faithful are not caught up in the spirit every day. There are times when we are like the captives in Babylon. We refuse to sing because things seem so hopeless.

But, when the opportunity comes, when the spirit speaks, singing God's song can lift the troubled heart.

There is power in praise.

Amen.