

All Creation is Alive With Praise

A sermon preached by the Revd. Theodore S. Atkinson at the Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the Third Sunday of Easter, April 13, 1986: Scripture Lesson: Revelation 5:11-14.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

It's difficult, at times, to really turn our attention away from ourselves and our troubles and to really praise God. When you're out of work and short of money; when your marriage is on the rocks; when your sons and daughters are beyond your command; when you're struggling with some terminal illness or facing some fearful surgery or wrestling with some temptation or doubt so often our thoughts turn inward upon ourselves.

St John of the Revelation was facing the most difficult of times. The emperor Domitian decreed that he was to be worshipped as God. Many Christians refused to worship the emperor and were martyred. Others had escaped only by compromising their faith. John himself had been arrested and sent off to the island of Patmos. John was lonely and isolated, cut off from the community of faith. He had no idea what the future held for him or for the church. It looked dark, nearly as dark as that dark Friday when Jesus of Nazareth was crucified. John must have been tempted to self-pity and doubt and despair but he didn't give in to those luxuries.

Instead, John looked away from himself and up to heaven and he heard angels singing a hymn. Unlike many of our hymns and most of our sermons the song John heard contains no instruction, no moralizing, no analysis of our human situation, no confession of sin, no arguments, no advice. It opens and closes with praise. ^{with no name...} One of the glories of Christian worship is that we can turn, from time to time, from our pre-occupation with ourselves, our passing concerns, our problems, our doubt and fears, and simply join with the choirs of heaven in praise to God and to Christ.

In your darkest night, when you feel alone, cut off from your loved ones, when you're wrestling in the night with dark fears and doubts and temptation, be still, look away from yourself, look up and listen. Let the angels break through all the thunder and turmoil and skepticism and complacency of your life. Let that music from around the throne of God remind you that God is on the throne of this universe, and that behind all the heartbreak and sorrow and death in this world there's the face of Christ.

I remember one scene from the Walton series years ago. It was during WWII. One of the Walton boys was in the war. I think it was Jim-boy. He was fighting from island to island in the South Pacific. He was far from home. Some of his buddies had been killed in combat. They'd just come through-a-monsoon and he was drenched, ~~soaking wet~~ and miserable. It was darkest night. During a lull in the fighting news came over the battery operated field radio. They gathered around the radio and listened intently. It was news from far away, from across the ocean, from Washington. They could hardly make out the message with all screech and scratch of static. The words grew stronger than faded away. But they could just make out what the messenger was saying. *The war is over! Japan has surrendered!* And then they heard from far away a choir singing the national anthem. It was like angels from heaven. There they were out on some lonely island, like St John. The enemy still didn't know the war was over. It would still be months and months before they got back home. ^{Many} ~~Some~~ soldiers ~~would~~ ^{would} still die. But the war was over.

And still today, if we look away from ourselves, like St John, and look up and listen we also will hear music from another world reminding us that the war is over. The strife is o'er, the battle done; the victory of life

is won; the song of triumph has begun. The enemy doesn't know it yet. We & this world still have a long way to go before we reach home and safety. But the Lamb who was slain one dark Friday is risen and reigns over this universe. ~~Brute~~ ^{ferocious} strength and military might doesn't win in the end. Empires rise and fall. The Church marches on. Though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the ruler yet.

But John not only looked up to heaven he looked out at the universe. The silent stars, the heaving oceans, the gusting winds, the fruit-trees, the cattle, the birds; the whole creation comes alive with praise. *Every creature in heaven & on earth & under the earth & in the sea*

John knows all too well, and so do we, that there's much on earth and under the earth and in the sea which has no inclination to join in the worship of Christ. He knows all about the wild-beasts that devour Christians in the arena. He knows that this world has even stranger and more hideous beasts that sit on thrones and wield incredible power. And he knows all about natural disasters, disease, bloodshed, famine and death. He knows that at present the rulers of this world continue to worship power and brute strength. John isn't an arm chair theologian who's never experienced any darkness or defeat in his life. He's been on the forefront of the battle. He's been bloodied. He's been arrested by the beastly authorities, imprisoned, exiled. He faces loneliness. But he has so much confidence in the universality of what Christ has done on the cross that his vision can't stop short of a universal response. He agrees with Paul that God has already by the cross reconciled the whole universe to himself.

John knows that the glory of the creator God can still be seen and heard in this vast universe. The God we believe in is a God who expresses himself in creation. And even in a fallen world, the stones and stars still

declare the glory of God.

Francis Kilvert who died in 1879, spent his life as a curate in a country parish in England. After his death his diary was published. On Easter Sunday, 1876 he wrote, "I rose early and went out into the fresh brilliant morning between 6 and 7 o'clock. The sun had already risen some time but the grass was still white with the hoar frost. I walked across the Commons in the bright sunny quiet empty morning listening to the rising of the lark as he went up in all ecstasy of song into the blue unclouded sky and gave in his Easter morning hymn at Heaven's Gate. Then came the echo and answer of earth as the Easter bells rang out their joy peals from the Church Towers all round: Kington St. Michael leading the Choir, Chippenham Old Church following, and later on I heard the sound of the great bell booming down from Bremhill in the east over the ridge of Bencroft. It was very sweet and lovely, the bright silent sunny morning, and the lark rising and singing alone in the blue sky, and then suddenly the morning air all alive with the music of sweet bells ringing for the joy of the Resurrection. 'The Lord is risen,' smiled the sun. 'The Lord is risen,' sang the Lark. And the Church bells in their joyous peaking answered from tower to tower 'He is risen indeed.'"

Look away from yourselves; look up to heaven; look out at God's universe and hear all creation come alive with praise. That's what I hear St John telling us in our Scripture lesson. You can't find yourself by looking inward all the time. By concentrating only on *your* feelings, needs, wants, and desires and by learning to assert them more freely, you don't become a more creative self; you become more self-centered, smaller, isolated. Look away! Look up to heaven! Look out at God's creation!

St John doesn't, however, simply say, "Come away from the horror of things and take a look at the daffodils and crocuses in the springtime and listen in the night for angels." No! John leads us, in his strange book of revelations, right into the very midst of the horror of things, and meets God there; God speaks to him out of the heart of the darkness. John doesn't want us ever to forget that at the center of the Christian gospel, at the center of the universe, in the midst of the throne, is the Cross, and on that Cross is the lamb that was slain. The gospel is not lyrical sentimentality about angels and the loveliness of the universe. No! John tells us that God's victory, and ours, comes at an immense cost to God.

H.H. Farmer tells that as a young man he preached a sermon on the love of God. In the congregation was an Old Polish Jew who'd been converted to the Christian-Faith.—After the service he came up to Dr. Farmer and said: 'You have no right to speak of the love of God until you've seen, as I have, a massacre of Jews in Poland— until you've seen, as I have seen, the blood of your dearest friends running in the gutters on a grey winter morning.' Dr. Farmer asked how it was that, having seen such a massacre, he had come to believe in the love of God. The Polish Jew replied that the Christian gospel first began to lay hold of him because it made him see God, the love of God, in those blood-stained streets on that grey morning. It made him see the love of God, not somewhere else, but in that very place where love bared its heart to the world— in the blood and sweat, the agony and tears of the Cross.

So also John saw the Love of God in the Lamb that was slain. And so John could face the beasts and plagues and horrors that have come upon this world and know that, come what may, the future is in the hands of the Risen Christ and behind the world, behind the universe with all its sin and

misery is Jesus Christ. And so can we face whatever the dark future might hold for us as individuals, as a nation, or as the human race, because we also know the future is in the hands of the Risen Christ who loved us and gave himself for us to redeem us.

Amen.

Let us pray: Almighty and everlasting God, you made the universe with all its marvelous order, its atoms, worlds, and galaxies, and the infinite complexity of living creatures: Grant that, as we probe the mysteries of your creation, we may come to know you more truly, and more surely fulfill our role in your eternal purpose; in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.