

In Sorrow, Yet Rejoicing Still

A Sermon Preached by Anne Carey at Lutheran Church of the Holy Trinity, Vallejo, CA
April 21, 2013

Texts: Acts 9:36-43
Psalm 23
Revelation 7:9-17
John 10:22-30

This has been a hard week on many counts, not least the bombings at the Boston Marathon that killed three bystanders including an eight-year-old child and wounded close to 200 people, many of them critically. We are horrified by the senseless violence of such acts, while we are heartened by the determination of the people of Boston to be strong -- "Boston Strong" -- in the midst of their tragic circumstances. To express our solidarity with our neighbors on the other side of the country and with all our neighbors in need throughout the world, I invite you to pray responsively the prayer printed on the back of the announcements sheet in your bulletin. Let us pray together:

God of all humanity, be with us all.
When there is much we don't understand,
Be our wisdom that passes human understanding.
When we feel unease and wariness,
Grant us your peace.
When we find reason to despair,
Grant us hope in your unending love.
When we see evil,
Shine through the many who offer help.
Where we feel lost in darkness,
Be the light that has never been overcome.
Time and time again,
You have been our strength,
In days of our past,
We have known your presence,
In times of struggle,
You have been at our side.
God of love and peace, live and move among us now,
Alive in our midst,

Unending in your love
We place our trust in you. Amen.

On more than one occasion, I have considered that the lectionary does not serve us well. This three-year cycle of scripture readings that we hear in our Sunday worship leaves out some important dimensions of scripture. For example, the role of women in the whole biblical story is often overlooked by the selections that make up our readings. You may have noticed that often the Psalm that we read responsively is chopped into pieces, and maybe you've wondered what parts were skipped over. We don't hear much about Elijah and Elisha, but we get an earful of Jeremiah. No doubt there were sound reasons for all of the above in the minds of the various committees who created and revised the lectionary over the years. However, if the lectionary is the primary source of our knowledge about the Bible, we may have a somewhat deficient understanding of its contents.

For no book of the Bible is this more the case than the Book of Revelation. The passages from Revelation that we hear on Sunday morning are far from the whole story. We're hearing just the "good parts," and what is omitted is the rest of the story: the shocking violence, the unrelenting cruelty and oppression, famine and disease, the destruction of whole peoples and of the earth itself. Maybe the lectionary selectors decided that we shouldn't have to hear about such things when we come to church. But reality has a way of intruding on our consciousness, even in church. While we worship here, people are still picking up the pieces in Boston, in Texas after a fertilizer plant explosion, in Iran and China after earthquakes, in Iraq after car bombs, in Afghanistan after roadside bombs, in Mogadishu, Somalia after an attack on the country's court system, in Pakistan and Yemen and on the streets of Chicago and Los Angeles and Miami and, yes, Vallejo. We cannot leave our awareness of suffering, whether our own or that of others and

of God's good creation, we cannot leave that awareness at the sanctuary door. Even if we want to do that, we can't. We have to try to make some sense of the difficult world in which we live.

Indeed, if we are to learn something from the Book of Revelation, it might be that it was written for people who are in exactly that situation: people trying to make sense of a difficult world. The sociologist of religion, Rodney Stark, has calculated that by the time that Revelation was being passed around from one Christian community to another, there was a total of only about 7,000 Christians worldwide. These communities were mostly small and mostly fragile, with no power at all apart from this completely irrational faith in a risen Savior. There's not agreement among scholars as to when the Romans really ramped up the persecution of Christians, but it may have already begun when John of Patmos was writing down his extraordinary vision. In any case, it's clear that being Christian was not going to win you any popularity contests at that time. The reality for them was an environment of increasing inequality and injustice, personal and communal danger.

The genius of Revelation is that it is unflinching about the injustice and evil in the world. Read the parts of the text that come between our Sunday morning snippets. The paradox of Revelation is that the response of the faithful to that injustice and evil is... singing! Barbara Rossing, who teaches New Testament at the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago and is a noted scholar of Revelation, says she is attracted to the book "because it takes a stand in favor of singing." Amen to that! In our passage this morning as well as in the one we heard last Sunday, the angels and the elders and the multitude from every people and nation, and indeed every creature in all of creation, everything that is, is singing praise to the God of all creation. If we counted up all the hymns that are sung in Revelation, there would be at least fifteen of them. Last Sunday, did you hear the echoes of Handel's "Messiah" in the words, "Worthy is the Lamb

that was slain," or discover the source of the Hymn of Praise that we sing every Sunday: "Sing with all the people of God and join in the hymn of all creation"? Nobody left out, nobody left behind.

So the grand drama that is Revelation is punctuated by these eruptions of singing. It reminds me of the struggle for civil rights for African Americans in this country, when nonviolent advocates for justice would hold hands like this and sing "We Shall Overcome" as they were being beaten with clubs and attacked with water cannons. Or hearing the strains of "Give Peace a Chance" on the streets of San Francisco and elsewhere not too long ago. Or singing along with hundreds of others Holly Near's song, "We Are a Gentle, Angry People," at a church gathering where the status of gays and lesbians was being debated without our participation. Singing has its own power!

More than that, though, these passages of praise give us some hints about the character of the God who is being praised. Consider what we learn from John's exchange with one of the elders about the identity of the singers, the great multitude dressed all in white. This crowd without number, they are ones who have come through some great ordeal, maybe slaughtered just like the Lamb, killed for their faithfulness. Or maybe starved to death in abject poverty, or dead from slaving in the heat of the fields of the landowners. Maybe they're the 99 percent. We don't know. What we do know from the words of that elder is that their shelter, their comfort, their source of all peace and good, is the God they are praising, the God who feeds and clothes them and wipes away their tears, the God of mercy and utter compassion. It seems as if the ones who suffer the most are the very ones who are the special objects of God's protection. They are those of whom James Weldon Johnson wrote in "Lift Every Voice and Sing," which has been called the African-American national anthem:

"We have come over a way that with tears has been watered;
We have come, treading our path through the blood of the slaughtered,
Out from the gloomy past, till now we stand at last
Where the white gleam of our bright star is cast."

We may not have experienced what the white-robed singers did, or what the enslaved ones in our national story did, but that does not mean that our own suffering is any less real or felt. We share in the pain of others who have lost loved ones, in our world, in our country, even here in our own congregation in recent days. We are aware in ever-new ways that connecting deeply with our own suffering and the suffering of others is what connects us with the boundless compassion of God, who has infinite care for the last, the least, and the lost. Richard Rohr, whom Clara brought to us last week, makes the startling but obvious claim that "God is never less loving than the most loving person you know." The character of God is love, and if God is love, then God cannot be any less loving than even the most loving person you know.

Now, earlier in Revelation there is another reference to these white-clad ones. They are shown to be crouching under the altar, these souls who have been slaughtered, and they are crying out for relief from beneath the shelter of God's table. What a powerful vision for the church, the people of God! When we are the church at its best, we feed the hungry, protect the weary and wounded, wipe away the tears of those who need presence and comfort, and stand for hope beyond even the worst suffering. The real actors in our contemporary drama are not in Washington or Wall Street, in Sacramento or city hall. We, ordinary citizens and ordinary Christians, are the human face of divine love and grace and mercy, right here, right now. Our faith is an incarnational one, an embodied one, a faith that loves bodies just as Jesus did, a faith that mourns losses like those we have experienced in these days. We too are sheltered under the altar of God's inclusive love that we are to offer to the whole world. We hear the words of Jesus,

saying "Peace be with you," and "Be not afraid." And so we celebrate, in this Easter season, life in the midst of death, hope in the midst of despair, and courage in the face of our fear.

The hymns of Revelation testify to the abundant love of God, which is the ground of an equally abundant hope. The first Christians who heard these words from John of Patmos needed to be filled with hope. They were facing a future at best dubious and at worse dire. Revelation is a text of hope, not just for those days, but for ours as well. It speaks to a hope that trumps our fears. Why? Because there is God, and there is the slain Lamb, whom death could not hold down. Jesus is risen, Christ is with us! Alleluia! Amen.