



The Soundtrack of Worship

TEXT
Revelation 7:9–17

February 7, 2016 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

This is God’s house and this is our home. Because of the newness of our sanctuary, we have stopped to pay attention to the gifts of this room — reminding ourselves why we need a sanctuary at all; reminding ourselves of the importance of this cross lifted high above us; of the love that is carried by ordinary water; of the stories told and grace served at this table; of the place of a pulpit, a word that stands forever.

But today we turn to the song of this room — the soundtrack of worship. People of faith have always sung, not just for the beauty. There is something about singing that not only gives expression to that which we believe and trust, but somehow singing makes what we believe more trustworthy. So I’m going to preach today, but mostly we are going to sing.

Look at the text we read today. Take your Bible out and look at it. You see the portions of the text that are indented there. Those portions were most likely hymns. I like to think that as Revelation was read in the early church, the people began to sing along. These songs were in their heads.

You know that experience of getting a song stuck in your head? It may be a song you love. It may be a song you hate — some ditty from a commercial on TV or a song from a show or something you heard on the radio. It’s just in there, and you find yourself humming this song throughout the day.

Today we want to lift up some songs that we need in our heads. Maybe you won’t need all these songs today; but you will need them someday.

I have taught you before that Revelation is often misunderstood in contemporary preaching. It is read as a threat: Straighten up or the world will end. I have no doubt the world will end. It is a creature, and like all creatures, the earth has a beginning, and it will have an end.

But Revelation was not written to threaten the unfaithful. Revelation was written to comfort the faithful.

Revelation was written to folks for whom life was so hard, they feared the world might not ever end.

Revelation is written to the American slave who knows little other than brutality.

Revelation is written to the Palestinian 6-year-old living in

the Gaza Ghetto who knows no chance for education or a future.

Revelation is written to the Syrian refugee who has lost everything, including family, and now has no place on earth to call home.

Revelation is written to the family in Flint, Michigan, who finds poison in the water and a lack of will to fix it.

Revelation is the promise that what we know now is not all that we will know.

And as counterintuitive as it may seem, the first song of Revelation and the first songs of worship are always songs of praise — a song that celebrates that God is God, that God is gracious and that all of life is defined by God. So let us sing our praise:

I sing the goodness of the Lord who filled the earth with food.

God formed the creatures through the Word, and then pronounced them good.

Lord, how thy wonders are displayed, wher-e’er I turn my eye,

if I survey the ground I tread, or gaze upon the sky!

There’s not a plant or flower below but makes thy glories known.

And clouds arise, and tempests blow, by order from thy throne,

while all that borrows life from thee is ever in thy care, and everywhere that we can be, thou, God, art present there.

And everywhere that we can be, thou, God, art present there. This is why we praise.

This room is an honest room. In this room, we know that the whole of the human condition is present. We come beautiful, but also broken. We are faithful, but also fearful.

We are generous, but also hostile. We are righteous, but also sinful. So we pray.

We pray that God heals us from the wounds that others have created and from those we have inflicted ourselves. *God, lift our eyes to see life as you see it. God, when we are in the storm, be our guiding light. We lean on you; we trust in you; hold fast to us.*

Sometimes our prayers sound just like this:

Precious Lord, take my hand; lead me on, help me stand;

I am tired, I am weak, I am worn.

Through the storm, through the night, lead me on to the light;

take my hand, precious Lord, lead me home.

When my way grows drear, precious Lord, linger near;

when my life is almost gone,

hear my cry, hear my call, hold my hand lest I fall;

take my hand, precious Lord, lead me home.

There is another prayer; it is a prayer of thanksgiving. I am instructed by the hymns of Revelation because their thanksgiving rises up from the pain of oppression. Sometimes we are grateful because we are richly blessed and all is well. We should be grateful. It's easiest to be grateful in those moments when blessing is strong.

But prayers of thanksgiving are not limited to the times of rich blessing. People of faith offer prayers of thanksgiving — even when our bodies are breaking; even when our culture seems lost; even when our families face struggle; even when the world tells you that you do not matter.

We are a people of gratitude because these are not the realities that define us. We are defined by a love that has found us, claimed us and will not let us go.

For the harvests of the Spirit, thanks be to God.

For the good we all inherit, thanks be to God.

For the wonders that astound us, for the truths that still confound us,

most of all that love has found us, thanks be to God.

Much like American slavery produced the spiritual, the suffering of the early church gave rise to hymns of praise that did not focus on ourselves, but on God. Like hymns of praise to God, the creator of the universe, there were also hymns of praise to Christ, the creator of church, of the community that is his body in the world.

These hymns remind us that the church is more than a voluntary society, and our belonging to one another is more than a choice we make. The church is the work of Jesus Christ.

The church's one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord.

She is his new creation by water and the word.

From heaven he came and sought her to be his holy bride.

With his own blood he bought her, and for her life he died.

The song of the church is beautiful. The music of the faith is honest — but it is also courageous. Sometimes our song is the clearest expression of our defiance in the face of all that is wrong in this world. We sing justice in the face of injustice. We sing hope in the face of hopelessness. In the face of exclusion, we sing welcome. In the face of death, we sing resurrection.

This has become a favorite hymn of mine, one I need in my head — because death is strong, and I need to remember that love is stronger. Death gets one moment. It is our calling to live every moment until our last, not to surrender our lives to the power of death. And once death has its one moment, even then we triumph, for still God abides with us.

I fear no foe, with thee at hand to bless;

ills have no weight, and tears no bitterness.

Where is death's sting? Where, grave, thy victory?

I triumph still, if thou abide with me.

*Hold thou thy cross before
my closing eyes;*

*shine through the gloom
and point me to the skies.*

*Heaven's morning breaks,
and earth's vain shadows flee;
in life, in death, O Lord,
abide with me.*

I triumph still, if thou abide with me. The ultimate promise of the gospel is that we triumph. This holy grace claims you by name and will never let you go. The gospel is personal like that. But the gospel is bigger than that. The last song of faith is the song of transformation.

Resurrection is not just life eternal; it is life transformed. It is a new creation. God will bring to completion God's holy intention in us, and there will be a promised day. The love of God claims us as we are, but refuses to leave us as we are. There is a promised day on which we base our lives.

*Love divine, all loves ex-
celling, joy of heaven, to earth
come down,*

*fix in us thy humble dwell-
ing; all thy faithful mercies
crown.*

*Jesus, thou art all compas-
sion; pure, unbounded love
thou art;*

*visit us with thy salvation;
enter every trembling heart.*

*Finish then thy new cre-
ation; pure and spotless let
us be;*

*let us see thy great salva-
tion perfectly restored in thee:
changed from glory into
glory, till in heaven we take
our place,*

till we cast our crowns be-

*fore thee, lost in wonder, love,
and praise.*

We sing the mighty power of God. We sing precious Lord. We sing thanks be to God.

We sing in our best and most grace-filled moments. And we sing when our lives are in the pit, and darkness is our constant companion.

We sing because God's promised day is awaiting us: a day when justice will roll down like waters; a day when swords are beaten into plowshares; a day when the grumbling noises of children's hungry bellies are replaced by songs of table blessings.

We sing because we trust the words of the holy angels who taught us to sing in the first place by telling us not to be afraid.

So we live toward the day when our children will grow up to be neither the destroyers nor the destroyed; toward the day when the sin and brokenness of our yesterdays is cast aside and forgotten; toward the day when all are lost in wonder, love and praise. It is that day, that holy promised day, that is the melody of all our song.

We sing what we believe and trust. And by singing what we believe, somehow, even our most daring belief becomes more trustworthy. This is the reason we, as people of faith, need these songs in our heads.

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The sermon can be read, heard
or seen on the church's Web site:
www.villagepres.org/sermons.