

THE ANSWER

REVELATION 1:4B-8

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The sermon for this morning I have entitled “The Answer.” Because here at the end of the Christian year we have just read a passage of scripture that demonstrates the answer to how the story of our faith ends. Despite all the things we see around us we have here the answer for which we long.

However, for many it could just as easily have been called “Overwhelmed.” Because here at the end of the Christian year, many do not feel that we have all the answers, indeed, we feel as overwhelmed as we have ever felt. We do not feel that the end of the story has arrived. Our world is still in shambles. So, where do go now for direction?

A student group had invited a campus chaplain to come and speak on any subject of his choosing. Having heard this before, the chaplain spoke to the student group president and he said, “*Any topic of my choosing? What if I spoke on the topic, ‘Current problems on campus that must be addressed’?*”

There was a long silence. Then the student responded, “*I don’t think so. Frankly, we are just overwhelmed with problems. We are exhausted from discussion. What I think we would like to hear about are solutions. Do you have any GOOD NEWS? Is there anything constructive and positive that can be said about the climate on campus?*”

Good news, indeed! There is a sense in which good news must precede any discussion of bad news. Only after we have been convinced that there is a possibility of grace, a possibility of good news, a possibility of the triumph of good, are we able to speak of what needs fixing with any confidence that it actually can be fixed.

The writer of the Book of Revelation seems to have understood this because he begins with unadulterated, exuberant, joyous good news.

The Revelation to John begins with a great shout of joy. This, the last book of the Bible, celebrates the triumph of God, the realization of God’s justice in a world that is filled with injustice and suffering. Here is no distant, uninvolved deity. In Christ, God has decisively entered the world, reclaiming lost territory as God’s own.

The note of joyful triumph that begins this vision of John’s continues throughout. Even when the letter moves from celebration and doxology to criticism of the church and the present circumstances, even as he wrote about what he saw to be the sin of unfaithfulness, all of that criticism is predicated on the initial affirmation of the triumph of God in Jesus Christ. There is the answer that comes at the end of the story to which we lay hold so we can cope with the overwhelmed world we experience on a daily basis.

Here, at the end of the church’s year, we end with focus upon the reign of Christ and joyous acclamation of God’s ultimate victory.

Here is a word that needs to be sounded in the contemporary church. When we gather for church, we are apt to be overwhelmed by all of the ways in which we fail at being the church. When we look at the headlines in today’s news, it is quite understandable when we ask, “*Where is God?*” In the light of today’s somber headlines, it seems more logical for the church to be speaking about defeat rather than victory. However, in the church’s peculiar logic, a logic that is engendered in us through our confrontation with Scripture, we dare to acclaim, in spite of all the evidence to the contrary, that Jesus reigns. God has met the seemingly overwhelming forces of evil with the overwhelming force of God’s grace and love.

The newscaster had just reported the death, in England, of a little girl who took her own life, saying that she could no longer bear to live. She was simply overwhelmed by the cruelty of her classmates who

ridiculed her and made fun of her because of her weight problem. The little girl said in a suicide note that she had nothing left to do but to take her own life.

After the newscaster had read this report from England in businesslike, unemotional words, she looked up from her script, stared into the camera, and said, "*Isn't that the worst thing you have ever heard; just overwhelming in its sadness.*"

I thought her comments were rather remarkable. Here was a newscaster who made her living, day after day, week-in, week-out, reading reports of assorted tragedy and heartache. It was amazing that she still had any feeling left. It was wonderful that she still could be moved to great pity despite her daily diet of assorted heartache and tragedy. Pity is no small achievement in an age when we are overwhelmed by tragedy.

That is why the British theologian David Ford has called our age, the "age of overwhelmed-ness." Ford says that in our age, we have been so exposed, principally thanks to the media, to assorted evidence of tragedy, heartbreak, and despair that we are overwhelmed. The occasional natural disaster, which humanity heard from vague reports long after the fact, has become our daily diet on the web and in evening news reports.

There are people who spend their entire lives compiling statistics of the pain: the number of deaths on the highway each year; the number of infants who die due to Sudden Infant Death Syndrome; the carnage due to cancer, or heart disease, or other epidemics. In fact, they don't even call it an epidemic anymore. We call it a "*pandemic*" because the results are so massive. We now are beginning to wonder about climate warming and if we have already tipped the scales beyond the point of no return. Little wonder that vast numbers of us are overwhelmed.

Some of us attempt to defend ourselves from being overwhelmed by the pain. We turn off the news when it begins, or else we become numbed. We lose ourselves in engagement with the sports section of the daily newspaper rather than the current-events section.

And yet, in our better moments, we know that this numbness, this psychic turning away is an inappropriate response to the problem. We must face the tragedy. Tragedy is a fact of modern life, and we must face facts. If we are going to do anything about the problems that beset us, we have to confront the problems honestly.

During an age of overwhelmed-ness, however, it is difficult to look at things honestly.

Today, there are many people who feel they lack the capacity to even talk about the problems of our world. They do not know where to begin. They feel that no one knows the way through the misery. How do you feel about the world you live in? Do we feel exuberant, confident about what lies ahead? Or do we feel overwhelmed? Our problems seem so large, so intractable, so resistant to our little actions. What can anybody do? We wonder if the most prudent force is simply to quit, to anesthetize ourselves in some fashion, to sleep, to dream. Where on earth would we get the strength to take up arms against a "*sea of troubles*" when that sea has become an overwhelming flood?

The answer? Here, at the end of the church's year, when we traditionally celebrate the "Reign of Christ," our text is from the Revelation of John. The Revelation, last book of the Bible, arises out of a troubled church. Rarely does the writer turn aside and give us a hint of the troubles that these fledgling congregations faced, but we know, reading between the lines, that here was a church clinging for its life on the fringes of the Roman Empire. You can almost see them there in that part of the world, a little band of Christians, surrounded in the pagan cities. They seemed so small, so overwhelmed. What are they to do?

Where on earth might one find hope for the future in such circumstances? There is no one to champion their cause and there are many people who are preparing for their destruction.

Where does the writer of The Revelation begin? Interestingly, Revelation begins with great shouts

of praise. One might expect the vision to begin in despair. After all, the church is in trouble, and the empire is stepping up its persecutions of Christians. What hope is there in that?

However, despite all evidence to the contrary, Revelation is noted for its sustained outbursts of exuberant joy and praise. The vision begins, not in despair, but in doxology, in praise, in cadences that scholars believe were derived in great part from some of the hymns of the early church. They certainly sound like hymns. Listen to today's Scripture again: *"To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever."*

Or we could hear the words from the 21st chapter of John's Revelation: *"See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; and they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more, mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away."*

John, who should have been overwhelmed by the great *"sea of troubles"* that faced him and his beloved churches, responds by an overwhelming affirmation of the grace and triumph of God in Christ. In Jesus Christ, God has decisively entered the world and is busy reclaiming a lost world. Revelation begins with poetry that evokes images of invasion, of cosmic battles, then of decisive victory by Almighty God.

John on the island of Patmos responded to the overwhelming-ness of the present evil with affirmation of the overwhelming-ness of the victory of God in Jesus Christ.

Sweeping claims are being made here. What happens in Jesus is not something that is personal or private, as we sometimes present the Christian faith. It is all very public. It is political and cosmic even. Matters of vast importance are being addressed. Seemingly intractable problems are being defeated. There is no corner of creation that is immune from this sweeping influx of grace. It is God's world and there is no way that God's rule will end in defeat.

There is an analogy to be found here to the Wesleyan revival in England during the 18th century. In the mid-18th century, John Wesley began his ministry in an England that seemed overwhelmed by social problems. The gin trade had led to huge problems with alcoholism. The industrial revolution had laid waste the rural English countryside, resulting in a vast influx of people seeking employment in the cities. Child labor was the scourge of the land. There was vast social dislocation and chaos. Things seemed overwhelming.

Eventually, John Wesley countered these problems not necessarily with a new social program for human betterment, but rather with a revival which *responded to the problems of the day with an overwhelming affirmation of Divine grace*. The Wesley brothers responded to the problems of their day with singing, with hymns. Among the great legacies of the revival are some of our most beloved hymns such as *"O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing," "Hark the Herald Angels Sing,"* and *"Love Divine, All Loves Excelling."*

What good do hymns do? Do they put food on the table? Do they solve any of our economic or social problems? What good did the hymns of Charles Wesley do for England? Or for that matter, what good do the opening hymns of Revelation do?

I think they respond to the overwhelming-ness of evil with an affirmation of the power of God. And that is the place to begin. If we lack confidence in the ultimate triumph of the will and purposes of God, then we will never have courage to honestly face our situation. We have to have some place to stand, some great foundational affirmation that will enable us to be truthful about our circumstances. Only secure, confident people can be truthful. Only confident people can face the problems of poverty, disease, and injustice. Until then we cannot see the way forward.

There are amazing studies revealing to us how many churches are leading the way in providing the way forward for many people as they link their exuberant faith in God, through Christ, with their

confidence that there are answers based upon the fact that Christ the King Sunday announces that God wins the day. The neighborhood church comes alive again as people sing, pray, study, and live a life based upon *“The Answer.”* The answer is—God reigns.

Therefore, Revelation begins with a great shout of joy, a great, exuberant, confident affirmation of the power of God, and it ends there.

Therefore, this morning, if we really want to face our problems squarely, if we really want to stride into this new year with confidence, the best thing we could do is to sing. We need to sing some exuberant hymn about the triumph of the grace of God.

You have undoubtedly experienced this yourself here on Sundays. You come here and, despite the best efforts in the sermon, despite the clear reading of God’s word in Scripture, what really moves you, what really fills you with power to go on is the singing. When we join our voices together in some great hymn of praise, then we know, in the very depths of our being, that Jesus Christ reigns, that he shall rule until all things have been put under his feet, that the enemies of God will ultimately be defeated, that good will have the last word over evil, and that all shall be well.

You know this, not in some rational, intellectual way, but rather in the deepest, most profound depths of your being. Worship enables you to go on.

That is the major reason why we come here on Sundays. We come looking for strength to go on in an *“age of overwhelmed-ness.”* The only way to go on is to counter the seeming overwhelmed-ness of evil with a counterbalancing affirmation of the overwhelmed-ness of the power of God.

Our God is not some distant, aloof, uncaring deity, some empathetic but essentially powerless being. Our God not only cares, but also acts. Our God has power to heal the broken-ness among us.

And that’s why we sing:

*Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord;
He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored;
He hath loosed the fateful lightning of his terrible swift sword;
His truth is marching on.*

*In the beauty of the lilies Christ was born across the sea,
With a glory in his bosom that transfigures you and me;
As he died to make men holy, let us die to make men free,
While God is marching on.*

*He is coming like the glory of the morning on the wave,
He is wisdom to the mighty, he is honor to the brave;
So the world shall be his footstool, and the soul of wrong his slave
Our God is marching on.*

*Glory, glory, hallelujah!
Glory, glory, hallelujah!
Glory, glory hallelujah!
His truth is marching on.*