

Scriptures

Responsive reading from Psalm 51

¹ Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your steadfast love;
**according to your abundant mercy
blot out my transgressions.**

¹⁰ Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a new and right spirit within me.

¹¹ **Do not cast me away from your presence,
and do not take your Holy Spirit from me.**

¹² Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and sustain in me a willing spirit.

¹³ **Then I will teach transgressors your ways,
and sinners will return to you.**

¹⁴ Deliver me from bloodshed, O God,
O God of my salvation,
and my tongue will sing aloud of your deliverance.

¹⁵ **O Lord, open my lips,
and my mouth will declare your praise.**

Revelation 21:1-7

21 Then I saw “a new heaven and a new earth,” for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. 2 I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. 3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. 4 ‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death’ or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”

5 He who was seated on the throne said, “I am making everything new!” Then he said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.”

6 He said to me: “It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To the thirsty I will give water without cost from the spring of the water of life. 7 Those who are victorious will inherit all this, and I will be their God and they will be my children.

John 12:12-26

¹² The next day the great crowd that had come to the festival heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. ¹³ So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, shouting,

“Hosanna!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord—
the King of Israel!”

¹⁴ Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it; as it is written:

¹⁵ “Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion.

Look, your king is coming,
sitting on a donkey’s colt!”

¹⁶ His disciples did not understand these things at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written of him and had been done to him. ¹⁷ So the crowd that had been with him when he called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to testify. ¹⁸ It was also because they heard that he had performed this sign that the crowd went to meet him. ¹⁹ The Pharisees then said to one another, “You see, you can do nothing. Look, the world has gone after him!”

Some Greeks Wish to See Jesus

²⁰ Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks.

²¹ They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” ²² Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. ²³ Jesus answered them, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. ²⁴ Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.

²⁵ Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. ²⁶ Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.

Sermon: What is the Church Part 1: The times they are a changin'

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer.

This is a sermon about vision. It's a sermon about hope for the future, and excitement about the present. We'll remain grounded in God's word and solid theology, but the focus over the next while will be on discovering what it means to be children of God, and how we find our place in the body of Christ. This sermon is also five sermons – but I won't give them all to you this morning. Over the next month and a bit we will explore together questions of power, identity, faith, religion, service, and discipleship.

I'm going to comfort you, and I'm going to challenge you. I will encourage you, and I will also rebuke you. I'll keep us rooted firmly in the past, keep an unflinching eye on the present, and I'm going to share with you my great excitement and hope for the future. God is at work in his creation – God is not some abstract concept that we worship but a living God who actually does things – incredible things that we can't even understand but we just see the edges of it. There are times that I can barely stand it – getting glimpses of things that are unbelievably amazing – just out there on the horizon – the anticipation is palpable, tangible – at times I can smell it and taste it.

While we wait though – we need to prepare. Jesus spoke often in parables about being ready - we need to be ready. Just as the farmer readies himself for the rains that he knows will come by tilling and planting his fields, so too we have preparatory work to do, so let's begin.

First point - this is not our church. In only a few weeks I have come to love it, I know you love it, and many of you have invested much time and treasure into the building, the organization and the people – but this building and the community that worships in it does not belong to any of us. This is Christ's church. Christ is the head; as his people we recognize no other authority above him. Christ is the head, he directs what his church is and what his church does. He is the good shepherd that leads us beside still waters, who provides for us and protects us.

We know that he will complete the good works that he has started in us individually, and corporately.

And yet - there is an anxiety about the church in North America. I hear from many sources across many denominations a good deal of concern that givings are down, attendance numbers are down. Church goers are concerned, asking where the young families and children are – because they are the future of the church. That one gets under my skin a little – I understand what people mean when they say it, but I need to take this opportunity to point out that children are not the future of the church.

The children aren't waiting to grow up to become future Christians, they already have a faith, and one that often exceeds ours – remember that Jesus said 'Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.' Children are not the future of the church; they are as much a part of the present church as any member or elder or minister. Perhaps that's why a lack of children in church, like a lack of children or grandchildren in a family, gives us that nagging feeling that something is just not right.

But, back to the declining church. National Assemblies, Synods, Presbyteries, Sessions and congregations gather to murmur, trying to come up with strategies to engage new members, to increase givings and get more young people in the door. The phrase I heard once at a Presbytery meeting – a different presbytery - is 'this is a desperate time for the church.'

But here's the thing. I don't think it's a desperate time for the church. Not at all. I think it's an exciting time for the church. If we read our Bibles we see that death is not final, death is merely the precursor to new life. Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. The death of Jesus, which was catastrophic to the budding church - I mean that really was the end of everything, everyone scattered and went into hiding – the death of Jesus was followed by the resurrection of an even more powerful Jesus who could walk through walls.

When we think of death and the end of things we sometimes try to look ahead to the end of everything – the eschaton, what we often call the final apocalypse.

Apocalypse is something that has become mangled by popular media and bad theology – I've talked about this before - we picture the apocalypse as the end – a cataclysmic destruction of all things. We see movies like 2012 where the earth basically falls apart, or Mad Max or I am Legend; tv shows like the Walking Dead where society collapses and anarchy rules – these movies and shows become wildly popular and satisfy some kind of morbid fascination, and perhaps even longing, for chaos and destruction. But this is not what an apocalypse is.

Apocalypse is not about destruction. It means revelation. It might surprise you that the apocalyptic writings in the Bible are not primarily about doom and gloom – they are in fact the parts of the Bible that most clearly speak of hope.

We find apocalypse writing in the Books of Ezekiel, Daniel, Zechariah, and of course Revelation. Ezekiel, and Daniel were written at the time of the Israelite exile – when the Israelites were at their lowest point. The land God gave them had been over-run, the temple destroyed and many of the people – certainly most of the skilled and educated ones – had been taken away from their lands to serve in a foreign country. Zechariah was written just after they returned from this exile and were trying to rebuild. These writings that are filled with destruction and judgement – which may seem to us so negative and terrifying – spoke of the return of God's order and rule at the end of the trying times. The destruction was a purification, a removal of the old order to make way for the new.

The book of Revelation is similar. Written at a time when the early Christians were being driven out of the safety of the synagogues and being viciously persecuted by Emperor Domitian – the book of Revelation recognizes the apparent hopelessness of being a Christian in that time and place, and like all other apocalyptic literature, speaks of the hope to come – a time when the lion will lay down with the lamb, and every tear will be wiped away. A time of the overflowing joy of living in God's presence, not a veiled presence as we experience now, but the direct, constant, consistent presence of God.

At times through the following centuries, some have managed to pervert that hope – that promise from God of a coming reconciliation with him and with each other – and we can use that future hope as a means of pacifying people in the

present. If we do that, we miss the point of what God is sharing with us, and we cheapen and disgrace the message. This hope for the future is not meant to make us accept our fate and lie down because one day things will get better.

We aren't meant to become passive and weak, hoping for some future peace. Quite the opposite. This message of hope is an encouragement – it is empowering. If God is for us, then who can stand against us? The early Christians who heard the message of hope didn't become weak and listless. They continued to gather together to pray, to read the words of the Hebrew bible, to share the letters of Paul and James and John. They stood fast on what they believed, despite the threat of persecution. The apocalypse – the revelation from God – was that they were to continue to do what God asked, knowing that they would be both vindicated and victorious in the end.

In today's North American church there is a similar feeling – a feeling of things falling apart, of persecution. The church is losing its power and privilege. Before we start feeling too sorry for ourselves we need to look around – in other parts of the world there is real persecution of Christians – there are believers in the Middle East who are being crucified in front of crowds by ISIS. Christians in India and the Philippines are being beaten to death in town squares while people watch and cheer. There is very real persecution going on in the world, so we really shouldn't start feeling too sorry for our own situation and call it persecution. We've got to keep our perspective.

So though we are not being persecuted, we are witnessing the decline of mainstream denominations here in Canada. Attendance is down, income is down, we are no longer welcome to pray in schools, town halls or legislatures. The church is losing its power and privilege. Christendom is coming to an end. And that is not such a bad thing as we may think. You may be looking around for rocks to throw right now – let me tell you why this realignment is both Godly and biblical.

The church was never meant to be in a position of political power. Let's look at Jesus. Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a slave, being made in the likeness of men. Of all people born on earth, Jesus is

the one who could have total power, total control. A king above all kings, ruler above all rulers. And yet – we meet a carpenter, a wandering preacher with no place to lay his head.

It's true that he rode into Jerusalem welcomed as a king by the people, yet when we turn from the crowds and look at Jesus himself, he was riding a donkey. A triumphant king rides a war horse. Jesus rode a peaceful, docile donkey.

On the night of his arrest, Peter wanted to fight, he wanted to use power and force to overcome adversity. Jesus said 'Put your sword back in its place. Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels?' Jesus never sought power over men – not even to defend himself.

If Christ is truly our head and our example, then we have to admit that the church was never meant to be hold military or political power. We've all heard the saying 'power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.' And we've seen that the church has been corrupted many times over the years – that's why we sit here today as Presbyterians, not Catholics. In the face of what they saw as corruption, some people chose a change – a reform.

Jesus operated on the fringes of society, not in the centers of power. He ate with the sinners, the tax collectors. He was anointed by a woman of ill repute. He was called a drunkard and a glutton because of the people he chose to associate with. Jesus never did seek to become the chief priest of the temple, or the governor of Judea.

Jesus shunned both the power of the sword, and the power of political office. Jesus rejected natural, worldly power and instead acted with supernatural power. Jesus did the will of the Father in the power of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, in the same way the church should act in the power of God, but not have its own power.

Jesus spoke to his disciples, who were the earliest church, of small things that have a great influence. Salt, yeast, a mustard seed, a light on a dark hill. Jesus never described what we would call the church triumphant. When the final

triumph comes - the realization of our eschatological hope – it will not be the church's doing. That will be God's work, not ours.

This means that we shouldn't bemoan the changing role of the church in Canada; we should not waste time worrying that we no longer seem to be in control. That is not our place, and it never was. Now, we need to understand that releasing the need to have a position of political power and influence doesn't mean that we shouldn't still pray for our Prime Minister, legislators, mayors and police chiefs to be Christians and act out of Christian values – of course we want those who hold power to be Christian and govern according to biblical teachings, but the church as an institution should not and cannot be a political power center itself.

So this is why I am not overly concerned about the decline of the church as a wealthy and powerful institution. Our power has made us unwieldy. We make jokes about how slowly things change in the church because of our bureaucracy; now, it's good that we don't hop onto every bandwagon, this slowness offers us stability, but it also makes us unresponsive. When things happen we are often the last ones to act. Martin Luther King said the church should be the headlights of our society, not the tail-lights; too often we are the tail-lights because our institution has become calcified and unresponsive.

As we see these changes coming upon us, this becomes a time in our history when we should embrace the true meaning of apocalypse – when things appear to be getting dark, right when things look bad, God is about to reveal his plan. In the death of a single grain is the birth of 30, 60 or 100.

This is the time when we should be looking ahead with hope to the future, because something new is coming – and God's ways are so much above our ways. Our plan for success would be to encourage people to come to church, bring their kids and open their wallets so we can be restored to the glory of 100 years ago. God wants so much more than that for us. Peter's plan was to fight off a Roman cohort and have Jesus take the throne by force, but a throne taken by force can be taken back again by force. God's plan of willing submission to death followed by a supernatural resurrection, a demonstration of love – literally an undying love – now that is something that can never be taken away or undone. No amount of

force can touch such a thing. God's ways are above our ways; even above our ability to imagine.

Think of what would have happened if the Pharisees, those responsible religious people of their time, had been given complete power to create a society of God. How would it look? Do we think that we could do any better in our own time? It's time to stop wishing for power. It's time to stop worrying that the world is no longer listening to us, and instead it's time for us to begin listening in earnest to God.

This is the time for us to look to the scriptures and pray and ask God what His plan is. Our plan isn't working any more. Over the next couple of weeks I want to go right to the basics of our identity as God's people. What does God's church look like? What is it supposed to be? What is it supposed to do? What does the Lord require of me? Of us?

We are called to a purpose, a glorious purpose, God's purpose. It is our responsibility and our privilege as a congregation to discern that purpose – to find it together. The same spirit is active in each one of us, and each of us should be expecting revelation.

We're in an exciting time - God is changing the face of his church – see, he is doing something new. The old is going, and the new is coming. God is walking about on his earth; I want nothing more than for us to find him, and to walk with him. I also want nothing less.

Amen.