



Rev. Tara Woodard-Lehman - 5-5-19

"Songs of Resistance"

Revelation 5:6-14

It's been just 2 weeks since that beautiful, brilliant day, when we gathered together on Easter Sunday and proclaimed "Christ is risen! He is risen, indeed!"

But just to be clear "Easter" isn't actually over. It's still Easter. In fact, many Christians call this season *Eastertide*. It's a time when we bathe in the tide of the Resurrection. It's a time when we explore what the Resurrection of Jesus means for us and for our world. Or as Wendell Berry puts it, this is a time we "*practice Resurrection.*"

One way God's people *practice Resurrection* is by singing songs of life. We do not to dismiss or diminish the suffering in this world, but as an act of holy, joyful, resistance.

It may sound simplistic, maybe even foolish to some, but a careful reading of scripture tells us that *singing* can transform hearts, tear down walls, dismantle regimes, restore relationships, and help us reframe reality.

We hear about this all throughout God's Story from the ancient Israelites songs of liberation from slavery to the songs of petition and praise in the Psalms. We hear the power of song in the Magnificat as a young Mary sings of a God who dethrones the powerful and lifts up the poor.

And we hear about it in the book of Acts, when Paul and Silas sing hymns of praise while wrongfully imprisoned for the gospel. They sing throughout the night until the earth shakes, the doors swing open, and their chains fall off!

Over and over again we hear stories of God's people singing songs of resistance and proclaiming resurrection hope, even when it seems death has the upper hand.

Nine years ago, I heard a stunning present day example of singing as an act of defiant praise. It was an audio recording of a Haitian woman singing just days after a massive earthquake struck demolishing the city of Port-Au-Prince.

Now, it wasn't a missionary organization or other religiously affiliated group that showcased this act of embodied hope. It was NPR, National Public Radio, on one of their programs called, "Audio Postcard."

With the sights and sounds and smells of death all her around her, a woman with a steady, but weathered voice, sang a simple resurrection refrain as she walked through the rubble: "Alleluia, Alleluia, Amen." By simply ascribing praise to our risen Lord, her song powerfully declared that the grave has lost its power and death was not in charge. Hers was a song of resistance and defiant praise.

In today's scripture we hear *another* song of resistance from one of the most fascinating, but also misunderstood, books of the Bible-the book of Revelation.

The book of Revelation can be beautiful but baffling. It can be encouraging yet esoteric. Full of cryptic, otherworldly songs and word-pictures, Revelation is considered "apocalyptic".

The word "apocalypse" comes from the ancient Greek ἀποκάλυψις literally meaning to "uncover" or "unveil." In today's apocalyptic text there is an uncovering of a message from God to a people in despair. And what is this message? What is this *revelation*?

It is, at least in part, this: There is HOPE in the midst of suffering.

At its core Revelation proclaims a word of hope to a people who are suffering, from an author who is *also* suffering.

The book of Revelation is actually a letter addressed to seven churches. The author of the letter is a guy named John. And John is writing from an island called Patmos-a sort of 1st century version of a kinder, gentler Alcatraz.

It's there from the penal colony of Patmos, on an island for exiles and criminals, that John receives a "revelation." On Patmos, God gave John divine visions and apocalyptic dreams that had pastoral, as well as political, implications.

You see, although John's revelation gave hope to some, they were viewed with suspicion by the worldly powers of his day.

John's vivid descriptions of a *heavenly* Kingdom ruled by a *cosmic* king threatened those who sought to build an *earthly* empire. So here in Revelation we have a banished prisoner writing to some of the earliest Christians who weren't doing too well themselves.

At the time of these first recipients of Revelation, the ruling majority worshipped not only Roman deities but also the Emperor.

Refusing to participate in “emperor worship,” many Christians were persecuted. They were persecuted not just because of their *love* for Jesus, but because of their *exclusive allegiance* to him. Some were even threatened with execution not for how and whom they worshipped but for how and whom they *didn't*.

These early disciples refused to pledge their allegiance to anything or anyone but the one crowned with many crowns, the one whose name was above every name, Jesus the Christ. Or as John describes him, the slain but standing Lamb.

Decidedly defiant, these followers of Jesus refused to cooperate with the powers and principalities of their day. At best, they were considered irresponsible, disruptive, troublemakers.

But perhaps what was considered *most* egregious and *offensive* to those around them, was their refusal to sing the hymns of the empire.

Because of their devotion to Christ, these Christians refused to sing songs sung by the Emperor Cult; songs that gave honor, and glory, and power to a *human* ruler who sat on an *earthly* throne; songs that reverently sang “Worthy is the *Emperor*.”

At this time, “worthy” was as much a political term, as a religious one. Dr. Walter Taylor puts it this way, “Just as today, the band plays “Hail to the Chief” when the President of the United States enters a large gathering, so in the first centuries crowds were trained to [sing and] shout, “Worthy! Worthy! Worthy is the *emperor!*”

In contrast, the 7 churches sang, “Worthy is the Lamb....Worthy is the Lamb that was slain.”

Those who sang to the Lamb were no doubt aware of its radical reverberations. These followers of Jesus subverted a song that was reserved for the praise of the Emperor. In this new song, the *Lamb* is worthy, and nothing or no one else. In *this* song, the LORD is charge, not the powers of an oppressive, worldly empire; an empire considered by the writer of Revelation to be downright beastly.

When John writes to the seven churches he knows they need a word-picture of hope and a song of resistance. John knows they need to be reminded that suffering was not the end of God's Story or theirs. John knows his readers need to know not only that God was with them but also that God was for them.

Given their circumstances no ordinary word would suffice for these tired, persecuted people.

Will Willimon put it this way: “What word do you say to those who are on death row? ... If there is a word it must be bigger and grander than our usual prosaic exhortations for self-help. It will have to be a word that's cosmic, poetic, outside, beyond the bounds of the expected, (or) the conventional. [It must be a word that can] be sung by a choir - rather than argued by a preacher- it [is] that sort of word.”

There have been times in my own life when I've needed that sort of word.

When our eldest son Josiah was two years old he became very ill. His vitals became compromised due to complications from a serious case of pneumonia. After a late night in the local emergency room, my husband and I were stunned, blurry-eyed, and trailing behind an ambulance transporting Josiah to the Intensive Care Unit at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia.

Over the course of the next few weeks we sought to navigate our son's illness, changing prognosis, and ever evolving plans for treatment. And though difficult and disorienting, the simple, steady presence of our faith community transformed an otherwise isolating time of pain into a stunning show of solidarity.

But to be honest, something else transpired during that time. In true lament fashion I petitioned God for my son's recovery. At times I could hardly muster up the energy to pray. But when I did, I let God know that this situation was not okay.

I also realized some of my views about God, power, and suffering, were starting to *shift*.

Prior to this experience, when confronted with the problem of evil or suffering I was content, even comforted, knowing God enters into our pain and abides in our suffering.

But during those weeks in the hospital, as my little boy and I spooned in the hospital bed, (or when he lay on my chest and I prayed that that my breath would become his own...) I didn't just need to hear God was with me, I also needed to hear God was FOR me.

I didn't just need a presence in my suffering I needed deliverance from it. I needed a word of life; a new song of hope; I needed a prophetic word that reminded me that although I felt (and in many ways was) powerless, God was powerful.

I think, at least in part, that's what this morning's passage offers us.

Today's passage from Revelation reminds us that when it feels like our world is crumbling around us, God is still in charge. Emperors and politicians are not in charge. Disease and diagnoses are not in charge. God is in charge- and God alone. God was in charge- God is in Charge- and God will always be in charge.

Though our circumstances are quite different from the 7 churches in Asia Minor we too must proclaim, as the apostle Paul says, "God's weakness is stronger than human strength."

Though our dragons may not look like the ones described in Revelation we too must confront systems of injustice that quite literally snuff the life out of the most vulnerable among us.

Clearly, the beast we face isn't the ever-present threat of the Pax Romana. But there other pressures, personalities and powers that seek our devotion, our time, our passions, our money, even our songs.

In light of such things, we are called to assign our worship to the One who is the Lamb. In doing so we dethrone the powers that seek to lord over us a spirit of fear or even drowsy indifference.

On this now third Sunday of Easter, perhaps the good, even great news revealed to us through today's apocalyptic passage, is that absolutely no power in heaven, or on earth, can separate us from the power of the strong love of Jesus Christ.

And though we may not be able to predict the time when all suffering will cease and every tear wiped dry we still proclaim that God is both with us *and* for us.

To be honest, I don't think we'll ever have adequate theological formulas that make sense of suffering- but we do have this: we have a God who is shown to us in John's word-picture of a slain, but standing Lamb.

It's a peculiar image, right? Who ever saw a slain lamb, *stand*? But this image is the one of the gifts the book of Revelation gives us.

Jesus is the One who is slain, the one who suffered, the Crucified One. Jesus is the one, in his suffering on the cross, will always be WITH us in our suffering.

But Jesus is ALSO the One who is STANDING, Risen One; the One who conquered death, the One who assures us in his resurrection that God will always be FOR us.

And it's this God, who gives us a song.

You know that song, once sung for an emperor, who persecuted our forefathers and foremothers in the faith? Today, that song is ours.

So let us leave this place with that song etched onto our hearts, the song that sings "worthy, worthy, worthy is the slain but standing lamb." Worthy is the One who is both with us and for us, even in the midst of this world's suffering and pain.

Alleluia, Alleluia, Amen!