

Epworth Chapel on the Green
March 1, 2009
Lent 1
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Genesis 9:8-17
Psalm 25:1-10
I Peter 3:18-22
Mark 1:9-13

Imagine, if you will, that you awoke one day this past week to find in your *Idaho Statesman* a front page headline that read: “Members of Epworth Chapel on the Green Targeted as Atheists.”

Then imagine that your phone begins ringing off the hook, with vicious and irate callers on the other end of the line, calling you names you didn’t even know existed, threatening to blow up your home, and even making threats against your family and children.

Imagine further that you muster up the courage to leave the house and go to Albertson’s to get some groceries, only to find once you arrive that you are shown the door and told that your patronage is not welcome there. On your way back to your car, some people in the parking lot recognize you, and say, “hey, that’s one of those Christians that goes to Epworth!”

As you hurry to your car, you hear them scream, “hey you blankety-blank freak, why don’t you leave Boise and never come back! Get out of here, you blankety-blank Communist, or you never know what terrible things might happen!”

The Christians to whom Peter writes in our epistle today were facing things similar to this, and much worse. Their new faith in Christ was bringing them face to face with verbal abuse, social ostracism, malicious rumors, charges of wrongdoing, and other expressions of hatred. Because they did not worship the vast array of Roman gods, they were also branded as “atheists.” This term carried baggage with it then that it does today, where to be called such calls into question one’s character, citizenship, patriotism, and social responsibility.

When you are the victim of this kind of abuse, you begin to look for a way to make sense of it all, to put it into context, to find some guidance that will help you to deal with it and to respond to it. This is the place that some of these Christians in Asia Minor find themselves as Peter writes to them. They need a way to make sense of what is happening to them, particularly those who were always told growing up that if they “just did what was right, everything would be ok...”

Well, everything is *not* ok, and so now they must look to Peter to make some sense of things.

In these verses from chapter three, Peter does just that. The best way to make sense of your suffering, he tells them, is to place what is happening to you alongside what happened to Christ. The best way to understand what is happening to you is to place it alongside the Cross and the empty tomb. Any discussion about *our* suffering as Christians must always have *Christ’s* suffering as the centerpiece

of that discussion. As Paul told the Philippians, “God has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well” (Phil. 1:28-29).

But Peter, while he agrees with Paul, handles it a little differently. He tells his readers that the best way to deal with things and make sense of things when you’re suffering and things aren’t going well is to *sing a hymn*. Yes, that’s right -- to sing a hymn!

Most scholars agree that these words in I Peter 3:18-22 are a hymn, of which many can be found in our New Testament. These brief creedal statements or hymns functioned then in much the same way that a good hymn functions now. They were condensed versions of the entire faith, and helped to express the whole content of the faith in a few words. (Such a thing was especially helpful for new Christians.)

So, Peter tells these Christians, when you’re suffering, sing a hymn. In fact, sing *this* hymn, because as you sing the praises of the One who was put to death in the flesh but who was made alive in the Spirit, you will become less preoccupied with your own suffering.

This hymn that Peter gives to these struggling Christians is brilliant, because it does what all good hymns do. It moves persons beyond the range of their own

personal experience and redemption, and shows forth the cosmic scope of Christ's saving work.

And unlike many of the hymns in our Epworth hymnal, this hymn from Peter to these struggling believers does its job with only two verses! Two stanzas is all it takes to reveal the depth of Christ's suffering and the breadth of his saving work. In the time we have left, let's examine these two "verses" of this great hymn.

I. Christ's saving work is not confined by space.

To understand this a little better, we must understand how the people of the ancient world thought. Theirs was a sort of "three storied" universe. It was a universe occupied not only by human beings on earth, but also a world of invisible beings created by God for maintaining life and order in the world (cf. Heb. 1:7-14).

These creatures are referred to in Scripture as angels, powers, spirits, principalities, and authorities. Paul speaks about these beings in his letters to the Colossians and to the Ephesians (cf. Eph. 1:20-22; Col. 1:15-20), especially when he refers to Christ's authority as being superior to that of these other beings.

While human beings dwell on earth, to those in the ancient world these other beings were found not only *on* earth, but also under the earth and in the heavens.

This may sound strange to us moderns, but this was the heart of the ancient mindset. And if you accept the conviction that Christ's redemption and

reconciliation must be as broad as the Creation, then it follows that the Lordship of Christ must extend not only to those who live on the earth, but also to those who dwell under the earth, and in the heavenly realms. This is, in fact, the claim of Peter's great hymn here in verse 22, which says: "Christ has gone into heaven at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities and powers made subject to him."

The Apostle Paul is more vivid in his words to the Philippians:

*Therefore God also highly exalted him
And gave him the name that is above every name,
So that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
In heaven and on earth and under the earth,
And every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,
To the glory of God the Father. (2:9-11)*

The grand message of stanza one of this hymn, then, is that there is *no place and no space* that is not reached and touched by the saving work of Jesus Christ!

But the hymn does not end there. There is more. There is a second stanza. If verse one affirms that Christ's saving work is not confined to space, then verse two affirms:

II. Christ's saving work is not confined by time.

This may help us understand a little better Peter's mysterious reference here in v. 19 about Christ preaching to the spirits in prison.

Once again, if Christ's saving work is broad in its scope and includes all creation, at some point people were bound to ask about the fate of those who lived and died prior to Christ and his redemptive work. One would assume that a

proclamation of the Good News had to be made available to such persons. That, says Peter, is exactly what Christ did after he was put to death in the flesh but was still alive in the Spirit. As the Apostles' Creed says, "he descended into hell."

While the text here refers only to those in Noah's time, because the unbelieving and disobedient ones in Noah's day represent the entire world that was destroyed due to evil, it is plausible that this group symbolizes all of those in the past who need a word from God.

It may also be a reminder to us of the lavishness of God's grace. Those in Noah's day were described as *the* most wicked (cf. Genesis 6). If grace can be offered to them, it can be offered to anyone and everyone.

The grand, majestic theme of this small hymn from Peter to these struggling believers, then, is that Christ's saving work is not bound by either *time* or *space*. Human beings cannot *go* anywhere or *be* anywhere that is out of the reach of God's love to us in Jesus Christ.

I do not wish on any of you the kind of abuse that these Christians to whom Peter writes were enduring. I pray that it will not be so for any of you.

At the same time, as we ponder during this Lenten season the path that Jesus took, can we really believe that our lives are going to be exempt from some of the same things he faced?

The question is not whether we will suffer as Christians, but when, and what form it will take.

As we prepare to come to the table this morning, let us be mindful that when such times of testing come, we have a very important tool at our disposal. We can *sing*. We can sing out the glory of God in our lives, and we can sing forth the reality that God's love in Christ is not bound by either time or space.

This means that Christ is also present to us now, in these tangible symbols of bread and wine. In ways that are a mystery to us and that even angels cannot comprehend, he encounters us here, and strengthens us with his grace, so that we can be faithful in our journey -- even as he was in his.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.