

**SERMON: “Will the Bad News Ever End?”**

**November 22, 2009**

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION: Lord Christ, raised from death to rule this world in love, open now our hearts and minds to the reading and preaching of your word, that we may be encouraged to live even now in the light of your final victory over all the powers that would seek to destroy our faith and rob us of hope. This we ask in the name that is above all names, Christ our Lord. Amen.

First Lesson: John 18:33-38

Second Lesson: Revelation 1:4-8

Last Monday morning the host a local talk-radio show was expressing his outrage over something in the news. I don't remember what the particular issue was that had him so upset. It could have been any of a long list of things. He stays upset. But as he came to the end of the segment, just before the commercial break, he asked, “**Will the bad news ever end?**” Good question. I suspect that more than a few of us have wondered the same thing, “**Will the bad news ever end?**”

The Christian faith has an answer, especially on *Christ the King Sunday*. The answer is a resounding **Yes!** Yes, the bad new will end someday, when Christ reigns as Lord of lords and King of kings! But along with that triumphant Yes comes a realistic reminder that the **someday** of Christ's reign is **not yet**. We live in the “time between the times”—the time between the first coming of Christ in great humility, which we celebrate at Christmas, and his coming again in glory to reign as King of creation.

On *Christ the King Sunday*, with fellow Christians across the ages and throughout the world, we sing, “Rejoice, the Lord is King! Your Lord and King adore! Rejoice, give thanks, and sing and triumph every more!” It is our faith that someday before the crucified Christ “every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that he is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

But the kingdom of which we sing and for which our Lord bids us pray has clearly not yet come “on earth as in heaven.” At best we see “only broken and scattered signs” of his reign of love taking shape among us. His Lordship is deeply hidden beneath the bad new of the ongoing cruelty and suffering of the world.

Somewhere between the resounding **Yes** of our faith in the reign of Christ as Lord of lords and King of kings, and the **not-yet** of his kingdom that is coming, we live in what the British theologian David Ford has called “**the age of overwhelmedness.**”<sup>1</sup> Isn't that a great phrase, “the age of overwhelmedness”? Ford says that, due largely to the impact of the mass media, we are exposed to so much human tragedy and out-right evil every day, that it would be almost impossible for us not to feel overwhelmed. We are bombarded “24-7” with stories of murder, rape, arson, natural disasters, flu pandemics, stock market gyrations, escalating national debt, the melting of the Tibetan glaciers that provide water for over ½ of the world's people. On and on the list goes. And if all that is not enough to leave you feeling overwhelmed, check out the new film about an impending global catastrophe in “**2012.**” I sure hope not! Think how it would mess up the celebration of our church's 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary if at about the same time a hundred foot tidal wave washed away half of the state, and the earth's molten core began to bubble up in Cleveland Park. Bummer!

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted by Will Willimon in *Pulpit Resource*, Vol. 28, No. 4, 2000, p. 36

In an “age of overwhelmedness” it is hard not to wonder **“Will the bad news ever end?”** That is why it is so important for people of faith to turn and keep turning to the biblical witness to the kingship of Christ, especially in the Revelation to John.

Now, I know, a lot of people are completely mystified by the Revelation to John. Some ignore it completely, which others make way too much of it. More than any other book in the Bible, the Revelation of John uses vivid, at times violent, images to reflect the overwhelmedness of this fallen world, then and now. John envisions images of a great dragon, and four horsemen running rough-shod over the earth, and the sun becoming black as “sackcloth,” and the moon like blood, and the stars falling from heaven, and every mountain and island being washed away.

But John is not dreaming up special-effects for a Hollywood blockbuster. John is writing a pastoral letter from exile on the prison island of Patmos—a kind of first century Guantanamo Bay. John is writing to a little band of persecuted Christians under the heel of the Roman Empire, symbolized by the beast with 7 heads and 7 horns. If anyone had the right to feel overwhelmed, they certainly did.

Yet look how John’s Revelation begins and ends—not in despair, not in overwhelmed resignation, but in doxology--in bold, defiant praise to the Lord who has come and who is coming again. John opens his letter to the seven churches of which he is pastor with these words: **“Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits that are before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, the faithfulness witness (martyr), the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.”** And he ends his apocalypse with a vision of a new heaven and a new earth, and the Lord God declaring, **“Behold, I make all things new!”** John begins with a word of grace and ends with a word of grace. **“The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with all the saints. Amen.”** For John the overwhelmedness of the world is encompassed within the parenthesis of God’s vulnerable but invincible grace.

Imprisoned on the island of Patmos, facing principalities and powers out to destroy him and his little congregations, John could have given in to despair. But he doesn’t! Instead, he envisions the triumphant reign of Christ in one dramatic image after another. John responds to the overwhelmingness of the world by affirming the overwhelming victory of the crucified and risen Christ, the Lamb upon the throne. “When will the bad news end?”--when Jesus comes to reign as Lord over all creation! So we sing as we did this morning, “Let every kindred, every tribe, on this terrestrial ball, To Him all majesty ascribe, and crown him Lord of all!” And with John we continue to pray, *Maranatha!* “Come, Lord Jesus!” Come, and reign in all the earth.

But the time of which we sing is clearly **not yet**. We are not at the end but in the middle of God’s drama of salvation—between the first creation that God declares to be good and the new creation when God makes all things new. But in the mean time, between the original goodness of creation and its final perfection, there is obviously much that is not good. In a fallen world we cannot afford to be naïve about the power and persistence of evil. What the New Testament calls the powers and principalities of this world are indeed out to get us.

Ted Wardlaw has an interesting way of putting it. Ted is a PC graduate who went on to Union Seminary in Virginia. After serving several distinguished pastorates, he is now president of Austin Seminary in Texas. Before going to Austin, Ted was pastor of the Central Presbyterian Church in Atlanta. While he was there, he says he enjoyed talking with new members about why they decided to join the church. But one particular answer caught him off guard. It came from a seminary professor, who said, “I’m joining this church because of those cannons across the street that are pointed directly at the church.” “What cannons?” Ted wondered. He had never noticed

any cannons across the street. The next day he went looking for them, and there they were—a couple of old Civil War cannons sitting on the grounds of the State Capitol building, pointed directly at the sanctuary of the church. Ted says that people join the church for lots of different reasons, but no one else has ever said that he was joining “because the cannons are pointed at us.”

But they are. Not literally--this side of Atlanta--but the cannons of our culture are aimed at this and every sanctuary in the land. The deck is clearly no longer stacked in favor of the church. Once upon a time, stores closed on Wednesday afternoons for “prayer meetings,” and malls didn’t open on Sundays at all, and soccer tournaments were never scheduled at 10:00 on Sunday mornings, but that time has long since passed. When our kids were growing up, Susan and I almost never had to deal with the issues many of you face every week in dealing with the tensions between school and church and athletics, and a host of other things, in a time when the cannons are aimed at the sanctuary.

One of our new members who works at Presbyterian College said recently that they were getting some flack for the advertisement on their website for the college’s annual Christmas program. The program this year is entitled, “For God So Loved the World.” Apparently, for some people even the mention of God on the website of PRESBYTERIAN College is offensive. Looks like the cannons are aimed not just at the church but at our colleges as well.

The sooner we realize that, the better off we’ll be. I think that is what the seminary professor meant in saying that he was joining the church because of the cannons aimed at it. We in the church need to realize that we are no longer in a privileged position. In our time church membership has taken on a new significance. It is not the comfortable, customary thing to do. Fewer and fewer people join the church, even in Greenville, SC, because it is good for business, or because it looks good on their application to the Rotary Club or the Junior League or the Country Club. As Will Willimon is fond of saying, we can no longer assume that our children will have faith simply because they drink Greenville water...not when the cannons are aimed at the sanctuary.

That means that we are called to a more serious and a more intentional discipleship than may have been the case in a good many years. Many of us are waking up to the fact that to be Christian these days we need the supporting fellowship of the church more than ever before...and the church needs to be what it is called to be--the Church of the Risen Christ, not just a religious social club. “For such a time as this” we are called to a new integrity of membership in the church. And that’s good! Seeing the cannons that are aimed at us can help focus our commitment in a wonderfully healthy way. That’s been true throughout the history of the church. The church has always been healthiest when it was “under the gun.”

In this time between the times, when we, too, wonder “Will the bad news ever end?” our faith invites us to sing of the triumph of Christ the King, and at the same time to be on the lookout for every little glimpse of the light of his kingdom breaking into the darkness of our overwhelmedness.

This past week I caught such a glimpse in a column by Nicholas Kristof in the *New York Times*. Kristof tells the remarkable story of a woman named Tererai (TEH-reh-rye) Trent. She was born in rural Zimbabwe, sometime around 1965. She attended elementary school for less than a year. Her father married her off at 11 to a man who beat her regularly.

Twelve years later, Jo Luck, the head of Heifer International, whose work we support each Lenten season, passed through her village. She encouraged the women to stand up, to

nurture their dreams, and change their lives. Inspired by what she heard, Tererai wrote down four absurd goals that she had only vaguely heard about. She wanted to study abroad, graduate from college, and earn a master's degree and then a doctorate. She had no idea what all that would require.

But Tererai began working for Heifer International and several other Christian organizations in her village. She spent what little money she could save on correspondence courses. In 1998 she was accepted to Oklahoma State University. She insisted on taking her 5 children with her, rather than leave them with her husband. But he refused to let them go unless he went with them. Heifer International helped with the plane tickets. Her mother and neighbors sold goats and a cow to raise money for her to go. With \$4,000 in cash wrapped in a stocking and tied around her waist, she set out for Oklahoma to realize her dream.

But soon the dream began to turn into a nightmare. She and her family had little to live on. Her husband refused to help and continued to beat her. The children almost always went hungry. Tererai ate what she could scrape out of garbage cans. She held several jobs, took every class she could, barely sleeping.

At one point the university almost expelled her for not being able to pay her tuition. But a university official, Ron Beer, recognized her ability and intervened on her behalf. His church helped with food. Habitat for Humanity provided housing. A friend at Wal-Mart put expired food and vegetables aside for her.

Shortly after she earned her B.A. degree, she had her husband deported to Zimbabwe, and started on her master's. But then he returned, fail and sick, now with AIDS. Feeling sorry for him, she took in her former tormentor and cared for him as he grew sicker and eventually died.

And yet despite the pressure she was under, she excelled in school. Each time she would accomplish one of the goals she had written down years ago, she would check it off on an old, worn piece of paper. Last month she checked off the last of her goals as she successfully defended her dissertation. And next month a one-time impoverished goat-herd from Zimbabwe with less than a year of elementary school education will don academic robes and become **Dr. Tererai Trent**.<sup>2</sup>

If that isn't a glimpse of the reign of Christ among us, I don't know what is. And if you ever wonder why we support Heifer International and Habitat for Humanity, and provide scholarships for needy students, and send mission teams to New Orleans over Thanksgiving, and any number of other things in our benevolence budget, remember the story of Dr. Tererai Trent. And be assured that at least from time to time the bad news does end, and the good news of Christ's reign of love begins to peek through the darkness. And someday, in the words of an old hymn I used to love to sing, "The darkness shall turn to dawning, and the dawning to noon-day bright, And Christ's great Kingdom shall come on earth, the Kingdom of love and light." To him be all glory and majesty, all dominion and power, now and forever more.

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<sup>2</sup> "Triumph of a Dreamer," Nicholas Kristof, *New York Times*, op-ed column, Nov. 15, 2009.