

We Will Sing A New Song

As I read today's gospel passage, I almost feel for the sons of Zebedee. They are so relatable and understandable. They are in a place to ask Jesus for anything, and what they want is greatness. They want to have the prized positions on Jesus' left and right hand in the kingdom. They want to be recognized as important leaders. If we are honest, who doesn't get exactly where James and John are coming from? We all want to be important, to be honored, to be great. It is a human tendency, but it is a plague on a church. Even among Jesus' closest followers it leads to division and arguing. And Jesus has to remind them that that type of battle for superiority is what marks the non-Christian world around them. What marks Jesus' followers instead should be a willingness to faithfully follow, to serve others, to point the way to the God who gave himself to give others life. That is what Jesus points out to them.

Jesus is saying, "Look at my example. I'm not saving you with greatness. I'm saving you with suffering." And if you want to follow Jesus that will be a part of your narrative, because it is a part of Christ's story. But just as importantly, Jesus is saying to them, "I'm not saving you *for* greatness. I'm saving you for service." And that service for which he is saving them is to tell the story to others. To tell the story of what happens on the other side of suffering - the story of redemption and hope and wholeness that come from following Jesus through the struggles of life to resurrection that occurs. That is the service that Jesus needs, for his story to be told, but it can't authentically be told from the prized place on a cushy throne. It is told by those who have followed Jesus through the reality of life's turmoil and can legitimately speak of the dawn of new life. It is work that is done by people who have actually known the struggle of forgiveness and can speak to its healing power. It comes from having failed badly enough to know that redemption comes only from the Lord. It is born when someone has known the weight of death, so that the beauty of resurrection has its full meaning. And having followed Jesus through those things, the service of the Lord is to sing song of salvation.

For too long the church has fought about who was right, who was closer to Jesus, who was greater, who would have the prized position. It has been the way of the church for many ages in a tradition that traces its roots back to the first followers of Jesus, and it always caused destruction. The sound of singing was drowned out by the noise of arguing. But the world needs more than that. It needs the faithful service of Christ's disciples who sing the song of hope. They need to hear of the one who Isaiah sang of - the servant who bore our infirmities and carried us, who took away our iniquity and led us back when we went astray, and gave prosperity to his beloved offspring through all generations.

The song of Isaiah here reminds us not that we are great. We are actually kind of lousy - tending to stray, with many faults, causing problems, and wandering into suffering. That's the reality we probably all recognize. But it also says there is another side. There is a savior who brings redemption. This notion is the primary starting points for most of the songs of the bible. And the bible is full of songs, many of them having this same theme. When the Hebrews had been rescued from the years of slavery in Egypt and faithfully brought across the Red Sea to safety in the great Exodus, Moses and Miriam lead the faithful in a song saying: "I will sing to the LORD for He is highly exalted; the horse and its rider He has hurled into the sea. The LORD is my strength and song, and He has become my salvation; this is my God, and I will praise Him."

When David is saved from the rage of King Saul and he realizes that God has given him sanctuary and will be faithful to his promises he composes a psalm to mark the occasion, saying: "The LORD is my fortress and my deliverer; My God, my rock, in whom I take refuge, my stronghold and my sanctuary; My savior, You save me from violence. I call upon the LORD, who is worthy to be praised, And I am saved from my enemies."

When Mary, the mother of Jesus, realizes that the baby she had thought would be her shame would actually be her salvation, she breaks out in the song we call the Magnificat. "My soul glorifies the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God, my Savior. He looks on his servant in her lowliness; henceforth all ages will call me blessed." When Simeon sees the baby Jesus, the savior for whom he had waited all his life to give meaning to

his toil, he opens his mouth and out comes the verses: "my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel."

In every generation it is the same. The people of God make it through some great trial, and through that they learn about God's faithful love for them, and they respond by singing a new song. They are not fighting for their own greatness, but remembering the greatness of the Lord. They do it because joy cannot be contained, because hope can never be held down. But just as importantly, they sing it because the faithfulness of God demands a faithful response, not just of praise, but of telling others of the wonderful saving grace of the Lord. This act is itself part of the offering that we bring into God's court. It is the offering we need to bring, that others need us to bring - to tell of God's wonderful works of salvation among us with all the resources we have.

I was recently reminded how important an act of service this work really is when I sat with other clergy from our area and heard them express the fear of their churches dying out. They needed to be reminded of the song of God's faithfulness, they needed to hear again the story of hope and redemption that stands on the far side of suffering. Some of their churches will close but life persists, God's mission will thrive. We have gotten an inspiring +-example of that recently. If you walk down the hallways of this church you will see the items that have been given to us when the Bread of Life fellowship closed its doors. While it is sad that that ministry has ended, it is giving way to new life, enabling the song of God's salvation to be sung anew. Those items are not only empowering our own ministry, but have been used to help our greater community through the East Bluff Community Center, and will go to other churches in the diocese who lost everything in the schism, and the song of God's redeeming work will find new voice, a new verse for today, new hope. This is how the story of faith goes: things will die, efforts will fail, it is sad, but that is only the beginning of the song of salvation. In the ecosystem of God they must give way to new life. We call that redemption, and we know it well.

And that example is only in my little church circle. In all spheres of your life people need to hear and hope in the saving work of God anew. Your friends need you to believe that there is redemption amidst the brokenness of their relationships. They need us to say we have been through broken relationships but we have learned to trust again and there is joy in it. Our neighbors stuck in patterns of failure need us to be a people who can let what is old and not working fall away because we have faith that God is doing a new thing, and it will be beautiful and to the glory of God's name. They need to follow our voice through the darkness of destruction to the dawn of new life. Children in our greater community need us to be a place where they can hope, and learn to dream of something other than growing up into gang violence. And among other things this year we want to raise the money to start a children's choir where they can come for free to learn to sing the song of God's faithfulness. We are stewards of the story of God's faithfulness, of redemption, and we need to find new ways to sing it out in our community so that all may know its saving power.

We have recently been talking in vestry about what the core values of St. Paul's are, what makes the spiritual foundation of this place. And one of the things that came up right away was the high level of commitment that people here have. In other words, what makes this place great is its faithfulness. What will make this church great in the eyes of God will be the way it serves Christ by telling the story of God's faithfulness. It will be the degree to which it lets others know that there is true redemption because you have felt it, that there is reason to hope because you have known it, that there is joy in the morning because you have experienced it and it will not be held back. We will not worry about being an important church, we will simply focus on being a church committed to singing the song of God's faithfulness and telling it among all people.

It cannot be a threadbare song - because no one will believe it. It must be beautiful and befitting of the new life we put our faith in. It must not be a time-worn toothless hymn - because no one will listen. It must be a full-throated anthem of praise to the mighty God of salvation. It might be the same old salvation story that God has been telling from the beginning. But the life God is bringing is new, the thing God is doing in this place is new, and the response must match it. It must be a new song and we will put all our resources toward singing it and making it known. God could make these bricks sing out if needed, but it will be more fun, more life-giving if we do it ourselves. So let us sing to the Lord a new song, and tell of God's saving works among all people.
Amen