

SERMON
“Love Music in a Cruel World”
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St. John’s Chapel UCC

John 10: 22-30

Revelation 7: 9-17

After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice, saying, “Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!”

And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, singing,

“Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.”

Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, “Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?” I said to him, “Sir, you are the one that knows.” Then he said to me, “These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them. They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.

SERMON

Thomas Troger, a professor of preaching, tells of a time when he checked into a motel for the night. The sign out front read: “Free Cable Television in Every Room.”

The people next door had already turned on the TV. The words of the movie they were watching were not completely audible—but audible enough that he could make out it was a movie about romance and love. It was clearly one of those movies that pulls on the heart strings—a real tear jerker.

Thomas turned on his own “free cable television” to discover no sound. He looked at the screen anyway, hoping the sound would come on once the set warmed up. Soldiers with semi-automatic rifles are leading four handcuffed men into a room with a plain table and a microphone. From the TV in the other room he hears surges of romantic music and the voices of the actors speaking passionately to each other. He catches bit and pieces of what they say, “ I promise you...” “... and no more shall we ...” “...but only love...” The voices fade and the misty music swells.

Meanwhile the handcuffed prisoners and their guards disappear from his silent screen. A newscaster appears saying something about the scene he had just seen. Then another news story appears. This time it is seagulls and fish covered with sticky black oil. People in raincoats are raking and shoveling the beach, which is also covered with the same sludge.

Ta ta ta taaa!
Ta ta ta taaa!

The “Wedding March” clearly comes seeping through the other side of the wall. The movie must be coming to a grand finale for trumpets are making their famous triumphal call:

Ta ta ta taaa!
Ta tat a taaa!

As Thomas continues to watch the news, shore workers pick up large dead birds covered with oil. In contrast he imagines the grand wedding processional on the other TV, the bride in white, the smiling groom.

The newscasters on his television insist on one reality, while the music coming through the wall awakens another certainty.

His neighbor clicks off his TV. For awhile longer he watches the news with no sound. Then turns off his set and readies himself for bed. As he settles into bed, the strangest thing happens in his head. Usually, after watching the evening news and trying to make his way into sleep, the news images fade from his mind to be replaced with the events of his day. But not this night!

This night the images of the handcuffed people and the oil-covered creatures will not fade from his mind. He finds that they are held there by the love music that keeps replaying itself in his head. The music that he thought was a sentimental intrusion on the real world of the evening news did something that broadcaster's words never could. The music amplified the distance between the cruel world and the hopes of the human heart for a life of tenderness, fidelity, and love.

Thomas Troger realized an important, profound thing that evening in the motel with free cable in every room. He realized that if he had watched either the news or love story separately, he would have entered one world or the other. He would have accepted each on its own terms. Now with the two held together, they haunted his imagination.

Instead of concluding, as he usually does after watching the news, "Oh, well that's the way the world is!" He found himself saying, "**The world does not have to be that way. The**

heart knows other possibilities.” As he lay there trying to will himself to sleep, he found himself praying for the handcuffed people and for the fish and birds suffocated in oil.

Prayer awakened by the music of love brings us close to the spirit of John, the writer of the Book of Revelations. John does not need a room with free cable television. He lives in a world where the imagination has not been dulled by television. He lives in a time when people still knew how to dream and imagine how God’s reign on earth looks. And John, even for that day and age, was more imaginative than most.

The Roman soldiers had exiled John to the island of Patmos because of his Christian witness. Like you and I, he knew how cruel a world this can be. And he knew he was more fortunate than his fellow Christians. At least he had not been executed. Yet exile was hard on him.

As he sat on the cliffs of this rocky island about thirty miles from the mainland, he could see the Roman ships sailing by. He could still here the cries of his dead brother and sister. Yet, there was this music trying to break through. Maybe the words that swelled in his head came from well-known verses of scripture? Or maybe he composed the song straight out of his overactive imagination?

It played in his mind as others came ashore carrying the bad news from the mainland. Christians needed shelter from severe persecution. They needed food and drink. They needed comfort as they wept for those slaughtered. How cruel the world was to a group people who only wanted to sing them love songs.

In exile, at least they did not try to silence him. So he sang to himself and others held captive—that song that perhaps he had pieced together from half forgotten scripture or made up with his overactive imagination. He sang:

Therefore are they before the throne of God,
[whom they] serve day and night
Within God's holy temple;
And God who sits upon the throne will shelter them with God's own presence.
They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more;
The suns shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat.
For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd,
And he will guide them to springs of living water;
And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.

In the midst of a cruel world John sang a love song that reminded his soul; it does not have to be this way. Deep in the hearts of all God's children, they know there are other possibilities. And as he sang, the yearning of the human heart to love, swelled within. If he could offer no other consolation than love, then he would offer it.

Look into the hollow eyes of people needing bread and water. Hear the song! "They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore" for the people of God know there are other possibilities. They know that we who wear the name of Christ will offer the food and water God provides.

Hear the song as you look at abused women and children? "God who sits upon the throne will shelter them with God's own presence" for the people of God know there are other possibilities. They know that we who carry the name of Christ will provide shelter in God's name.

Look at the people who have been owned by addictions. Hear the song! “For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water.” And the Christian who knows how it can be will lead them to Christ.

Look at the people mourning. Hear the song! “God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.” We who are the Body part of our Christ, the hands that will wipe and the arms that will comfort God’s people...even when they are the enemy.

Let us step back and look at ourselves busy bemoaning how attendance is down, how offering is down and uttering the dooms day philosophy that will certainly kill us. Hear the song! It does not have to be this way. Our heart knows other possibilities. “The suns shall not strike us, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be our shepherd. He will guide us to springs of living water. We who wear the name of Christ should know, above all others, that we must listen to John’s hymn and let the vision of the way things can be, swell in our hearts. Let us turn off all the mind numbing apparatuses of the world, all that keeps us from hearing the cries of God’s people and dries up our creative juices to dream dreams.

Let us listen with John to the music trying to break through. Let us sing with John until our songs cry the loving words we need to hear, and our prayer is not for money or people, but that we know and do God’s will. Let’s sing with John, songs from the heart, until our prayers and actions are one—and we know beyond a doubt that the shepherd does not break promises. He will lead us to springs of living water. When we view the world’s cruelty with God’s love song playing in the background, the yearnings of the human heart cannot be denied. Amen.