

“An Unshakable Faith”

a sermon by

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Charlotte, North Carolina

February 8, 2004

Text: “Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns”(Revelation 19:6).

Sometimes in the church we try to downplay the power of the spoken or written word. Often people tell me that “deeds speak louder than words.” Then there is that old saying, “I’d rather see a sermon than hear one.”

But words do have a power that we should never underestimate. This past Christmas Day my daughter Lucy, who is a Senior at Duke University, and I were sitting around our house. Our family had gathered for breakfast, then people left to go for lunch at different places, so she and I had a few hours sitting in front of the fire before the group would gather again for dinner.

One of the classes Lucy was taking at Duke was a study in “Rhetoric,” which focused on the power of the written and spoken word. We talked about some of the great speeches in modern time that had shaped the outcome of our history: Abraham Lincoln in his “Gettysburg Address” and in his “Second Inaugural Address;” Winston Churchill who with his speeches before the House of Commons and on radio galvanized the English people to stand against Nazi Germany; Martin Luther King, Jr’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” and his famous “I have a dream” address on the steps of the Lincoln memorial in 1963. Lucy remembered a portion of Shakespeare’s *Richard II*, a section that English school children are required to memorize that speaks of England.

Shakespeare described his country like this: “This royal throne of kings, this scepter’d isle, this earth of majesty, this seat of Mars, this other Eden, demi-paradise, this fortress built by Nature for herself against infection and the hand of war, this happy breed of men, this little world, this precious stone set in the silver seas, which serves it in the office of a wall, or as a moat defensive to a house, against the envy of less happier lands, this blessed plot, this earth, this real, this England, this nurse, this teeming womb of royal kings,” (Gaunt, II.i).

I.

One of the most powerful expressions of our faith in God is found in the Book of Revelation. Now, understandably, most people find the book of Revelation very difficult to understand. It is filled with images of strange beasts rising out of the sea, bizarre symbolism, and complicated systems of numbers that represent real people and real events. It is what is often called “Apocalyptic literature,” by which we mean that it uses all of this rich imagery to speak in a powerful way to a church facing persecution.

Most New Testament scholars believe that the setting of the Book of Revelation is the Roman persecution of the Christian Church during the reign of the Emperor Domitian, a brutal ruler of the late first century. An ancient tradition holds that Revelation was written by John, the Apostle, who was imprisoned on the Isle of Patmos in the Aegean Sea.

In the passage from which we have just read John describes the cataclysmic fall of the city of Rome. In this vision John sees Rome--with all its might, its wealth, its emperor worship, its persecution of the church--all of this falls to the forces of destruction. Having witnessed the devastation of this evil empire, the writer of Revelation declares, “Hallelujah, the Lord God omnipotent reigneth.” As I read those words, I could not help but remember the magnificent way that the composer Handel immortalized them in his composition, “Messiah,” and I wondered as well, how a man like John, imprisoned on an isolated island, could somehow find the strength to affirm the power of God in the midst of such debilitating circumstances.

II.

In the first place, that kind of unshakable faith is inevitably rooted in a deep conviction of the sovereign power of God. Sometimes we are tempted to think of God in terms of a loving parent, a gentle nurturer. “As father pities his children,” writes the Psalmist, “so the Lord pities

those who love him.” Or as the prophet Isaiah puts it, “As a mother comforts a child, so the Lord will comfort you.” But in an “age of terrorism” when Islamic extremists fly airplanes into buildings, killing thousands of innocent civilians, in an age in which a young Palestinian mother with two children will strap a bomb to her chest, blowing up herself and a handful of Israelis--I am left wondering if we do not need a larger God, one who is more powerful than we could have ever imagined.

That is the God of which Isaiah speaks: “It is he who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers; who stretches out the heavens like a curtain, and spreads them like a tent to live in; who brings the princes to naught, and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing.”

That is a vision of God that shatters all our lesser visions of God. Some years ago J.B. Phillips wrote a little book, entitled *Your God is Too Small*. That is where we are today. We are worshipping a God who caters to our every need, is always ready to forgive us, does not judge nor demand much of us, but that God is too small, and that God is not the God of the Old and New Testament.

One of the most powerful scenes in the New Testament is the scene of the last supper where Jesus ate his last meal with his disciples. He knew what they were facing--the shame of crucifixion, the long endurance of persecution, and the disheartenment that again and again would overwhelm. But listen to what he said to them, “You did not choose me, I have chosen you.”

Say what you will about the Presbyterians, but that is something we always understood. We knew that salvation was not about us choosing Christ; it was always about God choosing us. When the Reformer John Knox of Edinburgh stood in the presence of Mary, Queen of Scotland, what gave him the unshakeable faith to challenge the sovereign of his own land? It wasn't his conviction that he had chosen God. It was the conviction that God had chosen him, that God had elected him, and that the cause of the Reformation was God's cause and because it was God's cause, God would not let it fail.

Two years ago, when I visited the great acropolis in Athens, I saw again the spot that is marked where the Apostle Paul spoke to the Athenians. He said to his audience that he had noticed an altar with an inscription that read, “to an unknown god.” Paul went on to say to the Stoics and the Epicureans and all who had gathered there, “that what you worship as unknown this I proclaim to you.” As I looked again at that spot, I asked myself, “What was it that gave this strange unknown Jew the courage to proclaim in the intellectual capital of the world this astonishing message of a crucified God? Was it not the conviction that the God who had raised Jesus Christ from the dead was the sovereign God of the entire world?”

III.

Then too, if we are to rediscover this unshakable faith of which the writer of Revelation speaks, we are going to have to experience a new conviction of the eternal righteousness and justice of God.

The eighteenth chapter of Revelation is ablaze with the assurance that this is God's world and because it is God's world, the cruelties of Rome will not abide. Sometimes when things are going our way and prosperity and beauty surround us at every corner it is easy to proclaim, "The heavens declare the glory of the Lord." Or we say, "Bless the Lord, O my soul." Or again, "The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want." But one day we are forced to understand another side of our religion. "God is not mocked," writes Paul to the church in Galatia, "whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he reap." Our God is a God of justice and righteousness.

William Muehl, who taught preaching at Yale Divinity School for a number of years, noted that there was a new phenomenon on the seminary campuses today. He called it the "therapeutic culture." Everyone wanted to be nice to everyone else. No one wanted to criticize anyone else. Muehl noted one day in a preaching class that after a first year seminary student had preached a terrible sermon, no one would say anything negative. Everyone had something positive to say: "good illustration," "good eye contact," and "I liked the fact that you didn't use any notes." When I read this, I could not help but remember my senior year at Union Seminary. In those days each graduating senior had to preach a "Senior Sermon" in front of the whole faculty and study body. After the sermon each member of the faculty would rise and offer a stringent criticism of the sermon. It was brutal. The only good thing I remember is that usually the faculty was more interested in criticizing each other than the poor student, and if you were lucky, they would end up fighting each other.

In his book, *Not Every Spirit*, Christopher Morse demonstrates that the early Christians were persecuted not for what they believed (Jesus is Lord), but for what they refused to believe, (Caesar is Lord). Today, as Stanley Hauerwas has noted, most ministers are a "quivering mass of availability." Give us an activity or attitude that appeals to you and we will help you find some theological justification for it.

But what happened to the "Yes" that bears the "No." Someone has pointed out that one of the great aspects of the Barmen Declaration of 1934 was that in order for the Confession Church in Germany to say "Yes" to Jesus Christ, it had to say "No" to National Socialism. In every section of the Barmen Declaration there is a *credimus*, "we believe," followed by a *damnat*, "we condemn."

Today, we find it hard to say "No." We find it hard to say "No" to any behavior. We find it hard to say "No" to any religious belief no matter how bizarre, how heretic, how perverted it is. We don't want to offend. We don't want to appear judgmental.

But where is the power to say "No," the power to remind people that there is a higher righteousness over our own desires and instincts, a higher standard of truth other than what we want to believe?

When the great English Reformer Hugh Latimer was the preacher at the Royal Court of the King, he remembered that each Sunday, as he prepared to preach, he heard a voice that said, "Latimer, Latimer, be careful what you preach today, since you are going to preach before the King of England." But listening further, he heard another voice that said, "Latimer, Latimer, be careful what you preach today, since you are going to preach before the king of kings."

Jesus once reminded his disciples that there were but two roads in life--one very broad; one very narrow. Jesus noted that the broad way was the way of destruction but the narrow way was the way of life.

Today, we find ourselves at a crossroads. There is the easy path of self-indulgence, the path of least resistance. But it is also the road to destruction. Therefore, he offers us another road and begs us take it, the load that leads to life.

God grant us wisdom to take the road that leads to eternal life.