

“Verse 8”

New London UMC

May 15-16, 2022

Psalm 148 *NRSV*; Acts 11:1-18 *Message*; Revelation 21:1-8 *NRSV*

Rev. Joyce Rich

So there we were: just cruising along with everything and everyone in the universe giving praise to God in Psalm 148. That was super great to imagine all the stars and planets; the atmosphere and every form of weather; the earth from the mountain tops to the depth of its core; sea creatures, birds, cattle, beasts, and insects; people of all economic levels and ages and genders; all joining together in a symphony of praise to God! What a marvelous vision of praise! . . . From there we moved on to our reading from the Book of Acts where everyone (eventually) gave praise to God for the work of the Spirit among Gentiles (!) – starting with a Roman soldier, a centurion of the Italian Cohort, in the major seaport of Caesarea (or Caesar’s city) of all places! Wow! The first Gentile convert to the Way of Jesus! God was certainly doing a “new thing” there! . . . And we could certainly keep the praise going to God as we explored the vision in Revelation of the earth and heaven being transformed, renewed, and reconciled as one – and God saying things like, “I am making all things new,” and, “I will be their God and they will be my children.” It all sounds so good and wonderful – and then we hit verse eight:

But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the polluted, the murderers, the fornicators, the sorcerers, the idolaters, and all liars, their place will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death. Revelation 21:8 NRSV

That just took all the wind out of our praise-y sails, didn’t it? How did we end up at “the lake that burns with fire and sulfur”? And who knew there could be a “second death”?! My, oh my! The lovely vision turned into a nightmare!

But maybe that’s the point. If we can envision even a smidgen of the wonderfulness of eternal life with God – and if that vision inspires us to keep the faith when the going gets rough – maybe the “shadow side” of that vision can also motivate us. Maybe the shadow image, the nightmare of spending eternity in a lake that burns with fire and sulfur – where you can never reach the shore to get out, maybe *that* image can also inspire us to keep the faith. Just think about it for a moment. . . . Do we want to be unfaithful to God? Is it our intent to be cowards who can’t stand up for our faith and bring a witness to what we believe? Do we see ourselves choosing to sin, to effectively turn away from God in order to follow the idols of this world? Do we lie to ourselves about how much we love God? Are we liars? Are we living as the children of God – or as the children of Satan?

Do you remember the temptations Jesus faced after he was baptized by John (Matthew 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-13)? How the Spirit led Jesus out into the wilderness where he fasted for forty days and nights, and then Satan showed up and said, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” How Satan tried to manipulate Jesus

into misusing the power of God when his physical hunger made him vulnerable. . . . But won't our bodies always hunger for something? Isn't that why we can be tempted to sell out our faith in God's ongoing provision for Satan's offering of immediate gratification? But even if our immediate desires are satisfied, that's not going to be enough, is it? Satan will keep coming back at us to tempt us to jump at more and more short term solutions to what is actually a long term need that only God can meet. We know this is true. That's why we find such comfort in scripture that tells us God will provide for us – and that it is God's intent for us to neither hunger nor thirst anymore for all eternity.

In the second temptation Satan took Jesus to the highest point of the temple and told him to throw himself down from there and let the angels bear him up. But Jesus didn't see the need to put God to this test. Jesus already had sufficient faith in God – he didn't need an angelic demonstration of God's care for him. But what about us? We're often tempted by the desire to “see some evidence” – aren't we? Such a demonstration could help to shore up our faith, wouldn't it? . . . Would it? Isn't our faith in God supposed to extend beyond what we can see and feel? I seem to recall the resurrected Jesus saying something about that in a conversation he had with the disciple Thomas. And I also read something like that in John Irving's book, *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, where the book's main characters, John Wheelwright and Owen Meany, practice a special trick shot to dunk a basketball. Let me read it to you:

When it was so dark at the St. Michael's playground that we couldn't see the basket, we couldn't see [the statue of] Mary Magdalene [that stood nearby], either. What Owen liked best was to practice the shot until we lost Mary Magdalene in the darkness. Then he would stand under the basket with me and say, “CAN YOU SEE HER?”

“Not anymore,” I'd say.

“YOU CAN'T SEE HER, BUT YOU KNOW SHE'S STILL THERE—RIGHT?” he would say.

“Of course she's still there!” I'd say.

“YOU'RE SURE?” he'd ask me.

“Of course I'm sure!” I'd say.

“BUT YOU CAN'T SEE HER,” he'd say—very teasingly. “HOW DO YOU KNOW SHE'S STILL THERE IF YOU CAN'T ACTUALLY SEE HER?”

“Because I know she's still there—because I know she couldn't have gone anywhere—because I just know!” I would say.

And one cold, late-fall day—it was November or even early December; . . . I was especially exasperated by this game he played about not seeing Mary Magdalene but still knowing she was there.

“YOU HAVE NO DOUBT SHE'S THERE?” he nagged at me.

“Of course I have no doubt!” I said.

“BUT YOU CAN’T SEE HER—YOU COULD BE WRONG,” he said.

“No, I’m not wrong—she’s there, I know she’s there!” I yelled at him.

“YOU ABSOLUTELY KNOW SHE’S THERE—EVEN THOUGH YOU CAN’T SEE HER?” he asked me.

“Yes!” I screamed.

“WELL, NOW YOU KNOW HOW I FEEL ABOUT GOD,” said Owen Meany. “I CAN’T SEE HIM—BUT I ABSOLUTELY KNOW HE IS THERE!”

(pp. 399-400, A Prayer for Owen Meany, © 1989 by Garp Enterprises, Ltd.)

Do we ABSOLUTELY KNOW that God is there? Satan tempts us to doubt what we should absolutely believe to be true about God, and about our faith in God.

In the third temptation Satan took Jesus to the top of a very high mountain to gaze out upon all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. And Satan told Jesus that it could all be his – everything that he could see – if Jesus would fall down and worship Satan. Of course Jesus replied, “Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.” Jesus wouldn’t substitute Satan for God. Jesus wouldn’t make Satan his god. Jesus’ heart didn’t long to acquire all the material goods of the world, so he wasn’t motivated by greed. Jesus wasn’t insecure and hungry for recognition and acclaim, he wasn’t power hungry and willing to do anything to gain control of the kingdoms of the earth. Jesus treasured God more than anything Satan could give him in the here and now. . . . Fame, fortune, prestige, power, wealth . . . would we worship Satan in order to have all that – for however long our life on earth shall last? Would we make that choice and ignore the possibility that after we die we could face an eternal second death in a burning lake? What other strings might come attached to choosing to worship Satan? Perhaps you’re familiar with a joke about Satan showing someone a fabulous view of everything they had ever wanted, and saying it could all be theirs if they would just sign on with Satan. The person thinks, “This doesn’t look bad at all! Why not?” and signs on. When they die and find themselves in hell and it is nothing like what they had been shown, they say, “Hey! This isn’t at all what I signed up for!” Satan says, “Ah, you must be thinking of what you saw when you were being recruited. THIS is what you signed up for.”

Friends, be careful what you sign up for. Don’t confuse the One who is worthy of our praise, with what is not worthy to be praised.

Amen.