

A Love Song for the World

A meditation given by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on March 17, 2024

Friendship Presbyterian Church

*For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written,
“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,
and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.”*

Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.

Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God. He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, in order that, as it is written, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.” (I Corinthians 1:18-31, NRSV)

Last week, through meditating on John 3:16, we saw how the “God-ness” of God is not in the divine power, or glory, or majesty – true as these things are. In the witness of scripture, the glory and majesty of God is best understood as the glory and majesty of Love, supremely demonstrated in the person and work of Jesus Christ. And for Christian faith, this Love in Christ is mostly clearly seen in the Cross.

And so, as we near the end of the Lenten season, we focus today on one of the most powerful works in Christian hymnody – the hauntingly beautiful Passion Chorale, matched with Paul Gerhardt’s lyrics, to yield the great hymn “O Sacred Head, Now Wounded.” The great composer Johann Sebastian Bach loved it so much that he made it part of his *St Matthew Passion* in 1727. Few hymns in any language capture quite so graphically the physical suffering and agony of Christ, and the debt of devotion we owe to God for such a sacrifice:

*O sacred head, now wounded, with grief and shame weighed down,
Now scornfully surrounded with thorns, Thine only crown.
O sacred head, what glory, what bliss till now was Thine!
Yet, though despised and gory, I joy to call Thee mine.*

*What Thou, my Lord, hast suffered was all for sinners' gain:
Mine, mine was the transgression, but Thine the deadly pain.
Lo, here I fall, my Savior! 'Tis I deserve Thy place;
Look on me with Thy favor, vouchsafe to me Thy grace.*

It's *heavy* – very heavy. In fact, for all its depth of feeling, the graphic imagery of these verses and the strong language of Christ taking on a punishment that we are said to deserve ourselves may be a bit off-putting for some of us these days. In any case, it's hard and unpleasant to think about, and it's only natural to dwell on *Easter* rather than Good Friday – the glory of *Resurrection* rather than the specific sufferings involved in the Crucifixion. But for all its difficulties, something deeply valuable is lost when we can't meditate on what God, in Christ, is doing in the event of the Cross and draw strength from it.

I think one way we can tackle this difficulty head on – in this hymn – is to recall where the tune comes from. As Kevin has pointed out in the past, it was originally written in 1601 by German composer Hans Leo Hassler as a *love* song, “Mein G'mut ist mir verwirret” (My Spirits are Confounded):

*My spirits are confounded, all for a gentle maid,
I am wholly distracted, my heart is sore wounded.
There's no rest day or night, I ever make lament.
I keep sighing and weeping, in sorrow I despair.*

This was hardly the first time in the German church tradition that a secular tune had been adapted for sacred use (though I have indeed been mistaken about the supposed beer hall origins of Luther's own great hymn “A Mighty Fortress is our God”!). But here, it is a *love* song of all things – a song of longing (and the suffering that can only come from love's longing) – that Gerhardt chose ... The sort of song I might have sung for a time in 2005 when I fell hopelessly in love with a certain alto whom I was sure could never really feel the same way.

There are a fair number of examples in scripture of this sort of desperate longing, inspired by love, of the *human* heart for a *God* who seems far away. Psalm 42 is a particularly memorable example:

*As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God.
My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.
When shall I come and behold the face of God?
My tears have been my food day and night,
while people say to me continually, “Where is your God?”*

But the love song origins of the Passion Chorale take things to a new level. I believe that there is something deeply providential here, as these origins offer us a different way of seeing the

meaning of the Cross, and with it, of expressing a *divine* longing beyond comprehension – that of *God's* pining passion for *us*.

We got a foretaste of it in the Isaiah reading that Wendy shared with us, in which God assures his people yet in exile, “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.” God promises his *presence* with them *through* the waters, *through* the rivers, *through* the flames – for to God's longing heart they are beloved:

*... You are precious in my sight,
and honored, and I love you ...*

And then in Jesus, this Word of Love becomes flesh and dwells among us – welcoming, gathering, teaching, and healing ... A life of total self-giving which culminates in the Cross.

And so, what if we see the Cross, then, as the final expression of this divine longing for connection A longing which drives the Lord of All to become one with the poor, the hungry, the thirsty ... to join the unwelcome and those without proper clothes ... to sit with those languishing in prison.

What if the Cross is about the lengths to which God will go, to enter most fully into the human condition ... to understand us, to suffer with us, to identify himself with us in love ... with the whole mess of us ... with the whole broken and beautiful human race. And so, the Cross is, forever, the sure divine sign and witness *against* all that would *break* us ... all those powers which would *deface* our humanity ... all that which seductively *promises* life but deals only death.

We may then look back at those wonderful words of that old German love song and discern in them something like the aching heart of God for us – for us, who so easily turn away, who so easily miss the signs of a never-ending love right before our eyes. But then, I suppose, that's what church is really about – helping us to see it, and to respond to it with evermore open hearts to receive, and share, such a love song for the world.

And so,

*What language shall I borrow to thank Thee, dearest friend,
For this Thy dying sorrow, Thy pity without end?
O make me Thine forever; And should I fainting be,
Lord, let me never, never outlive my love to Thee.*

To the glory of God! Amen.