

Silence, Prayer, and Fire: A Dedication Service Reflection

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by Rev. Dr. Eric Elnes

Scripture: Joel 2:23-30; Revelation 8:1-5

1. When Heaven Fell Silent

At last! The moment we've all been waiting for has finally come. In some ways, it seems like it was just a few weeks ago when we first started hearing God's call and responding to it. In other ways, it seems like this moment has been in the making for 2,000 years or more. Our journey has taken us from high peaks of *inspiration*, to deep valleys of *exasperation*, through long slogs heavy with *perspiration* on the high plains of *aspiration*. Now we arrive at a moment of *appreciation* for all the major and minor miracles that have brought us to this precise time and place. Now, Arnion – the Lamb of God – has just ripped off the seventh seal of the scroll in which God's full dream for the world is written. With the seal broken, God's full vision is free to break loose, enabling God's will may be done "on earth as it is in heaven."

Oh, you thought I was talking about our dedication service? Actually, I was talking about the lines we just heard from Revelation 8. Don't get me wrong. This is a great and wondrous day in the life of our church – for which we've been waiting for nearly six years to be realized so that we can begin this new phase of our life together and with our partner communities. But, think about the whole host of heaven, who has been waiting since the earth was created, for God's will and intent for the world to finally get kicked into high gear ... If you think we are celebrating, imagine the celebration envisioned in the Book of Revelation!

Now, if this is your first time with us in a while, you should know that we've been exploring Revelation since the beginning of the year, in preparation for our move to the Tri-Faith Commons. We're doing so not because we think Revelation lays out an "End Time" scenario where certain people go to heaven and some go to hell – as many Christians believe. Rather, it's because the opposite is true.

We've found that if you learn the ancient symbols and metaphors used by the author of Revelation, John of Patmos, you discover that the message of the book is exactly the opposite of what most people think. Revelation isn't about things predicted to happen thousands of years later, but things that were happening in John's day. And where Revelation does speak of the future, it speaks of a time when all people are saved, not just some. In fact, in the chapter just before this one, John sees ALL THE PEOPLE WHO EVER LIVED standing together, in unity and love, before God's throne; all people from

every walk of life, from every nation, every race and ethnicity, from every faith tradition – together with the whole of Creation itself – all standing in awe and wonder in God’s presence and ecstatically worshipping.

Once John sees this amazing vision of universal salvation, he steps back and speaks of events that take place before everyone is standing there. He speaks of breaking seven seals on a scroll, which is metaphorical language for seven things that would need to take place for God’s dream for the world to be fully realized. In the opening lines of Revelation 8, the seventh and last seal is finally broken. It is not the beginning of The End, but the beginning of The Beginning! Or, the end of the world as it was and the beginning of the world as it was intended to be.

In this respect, we share something in common with the host of heaven in Revelation. Moving to the Tri-Faith Commons is a beginning, not an ending. And given our firm belief that God has called us here, we can be assured that this is the beginning of something good. Something very good. Something that may just rock the world ... at least a little.

Given this happy little parallel between John’s vision and our reality, I find it extremely interesting that, in the celebration held in heaven when the final seal is broken, the first thing that happens is not the fanfare of trumpets, though it says that trumpets were at the ready, and it is not the singing of angels, though choirs of angels were present. What begins the celebration is not even a “word from the Lord.” Rather, it is silence. A full thirty minutes of it!

When you think about it, this makes perfect sense. I mean, what is your own response when you witness something that is so wondrous that it is beyond words to describe? When we are silent, we observe what is around us with all our senses, not just a few. We “see” not just with our eyes, but our nose, our ears, our sense of touch and even taste. The mystics tell us that when we are silent, *we see with our heart*.

I like to think that’s what the host of heaven was doing for 30 minutes. Just letting the magnitude of what was happening sink in, seeing more with their hearts than with their eyes.

I would like to think, too, that we could do much the same thing here this morning, taking in the magnitude of what is happening in silence, until our hearts show us how much more magnificent it is than we have even imagined. Instead of taking 30 minutes to do this, however, how about we take just three. I invite all who are able to stand for three minutes – less than the length of a hymn – to do so, while clearing a little space for those who cannot stand. Let’s join the host of heaven, silently looking all around us,

smelling and touching what's around us. I don't advise tasting what's around us! But I do advise letting your heart do the seeing.

[3 minutes of silence.]

2. Prayers of the Holy

Just as I find it interesting that the host of heaven fell silent in Revelation, like we just did, I find it even more interesting that the silence is broken not by the angels with their trumpets or their songs nor even by God. Everyone in heaven is still silent. What has broken the silence is us! They're listening to *our prayers*. Says Revelation:

*"Then another Angel, carrying a gold censer, came and stood at the Altar. He was given a great quantity of incense so that he could offer up **the prayers of all the holy people of God** on the Golden Altar before the Throne. Smoke billowed up from the incense-laced prayers of the holy ones, rose before God from the hand of the Angel."* (Revelation 8:3-4, The Message)

According to John's vision, before God's dream for the world may be fulfilled, every prayer that has ever been made must be heard. Apparently, this dream God has for us is not God's dream alone. It's our dream, too. It's an answer to our prayers. What this means is that God's dream isn't one that is imposed on us from "on high," but rather, it's as much the fulfilment of *our own* yearnings, as it is of God's.

As we mark a new beginning here on the Tri-Faith Commons, I suggest we take our cue once again from Revelation. Let's hear a few prayers of the saints among us.

[Single-line prayers follow from: Aubrey Fitzke (Trustees); Deb Hickman (Life Ministries); Trish Hoffman-Ahrens (Arts and Music); Juliana Johnson (Pastoral Care); Dana Parmentier (Youth); Ashley Rainbolt (Christian Education); Sharon Royers (Christian Outreach); Stacey Warner (Deacons); Mary Windle (Moderator); Tracey Halvorson (Vice-Moderator-Elect); followed by longer prayers from Rabbi Aryeh Azriel (Scholar-In-Residence); Rev. Dr. Chris Alexander (Associate Pastor)]

3. Never Place a Period Where God has Placed a Comma

"Then the Angel filled the censer with fire from the Altar and heaved it to earth.
(Revelation 8:5, The Message)

This description of what follows the prayers of the holy may sound less like the beginning of God's glorious dream for the world than it does the beginning of a nightmare! Is God's dream our nightmare?

If John were here among us today to answer this question, surely he would say that God has no desire to create nightmares for us. Rather, God's desire is to pull us out of the nightmare we are already living in. My guess is that John would be asking hard questions about where the world's military industrial complex is taking us. Is it creating a more peaceful world, or one where our worst nightmares could be realized? He's likely also asking hard questions about what we're doing to God's Creation. Are the immense carbon emissions we are creating leading to an era of great prosperity and security, or is it dashing our hopes, or at least our children's and grandchildren's hopes, of any future at all?

No, if John were here among us today, I think he'd be telling us that, to the extent that his vision speaks of the future (which isn't nearly as much as people think) his vision is not about God bringing about the end of the world and saving the few righteous among us from Satan, like many Christians believe. His vision is about *humanity* bringing about the end of the world and God working to save all us *from ourselves*.

In fact, I think John would be telling us that, as in his ancient vision, God is presently pouring heaping amounts of burning coals on the world. He'd also be reminding us that this is a metaphor – to be taken seriously, but not literally.

The apostle Paul speaks of "hot coals" metaphorically, just as John does. In Romans 12, Paul advises, "If your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will *heap burning coals on their heads*." Paul concludes, "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." So pouring burning coals on someone's head is a good thing? Paul thinks so. So does the Book of Proverbs from which he quotes. (Proverbs 25:22)

In ancient times, you cooked and warmed your house with fire. If your fire went out, there were no matches or cans of lighter fluid to re-light it. Starting a fire without such aids is hard work! So instead, you went to your neighbor's house and asked them for some of the live coals from their fire, carrying them back in a special jar on your head so the heat wouldn't singe your hands.

What Paul – and Proverbs – are saying is that if your enemy is in need, don't try to take advantage of them. Instead, be generous. In so doing, you will overcome your enemies by turning them into friends – friends you may need in the future if your own fire goes out.

What John's vision is telling us is that a major outpouring of the Holy Spirit – whose central symbol is also fire – is the first sign that God's dream for the world is finally being moved forward. This outpouring specifically results in former enemies becoming friends. This isn't something God simply does for us by waving some sort of cosmic

magic wand. It's something God's people do. Filled with the Holy Spirit themselves, they break down the walls that have long divided them from others and build bridges of compassion and respect, turning former enemies into new friends.

It is my deep and sincere belief that, to the extent that John's vision in the Book of Revelation has implications beyond his own day and includes a "word from the Lord" for us, it is this:

In humanity's great hour of need, where we are faced with the twin evils of cataclysmic human violence and irreversible climate change that could literally end life on earth as we know it, God is waking us up from this nightmare in order to embrace a new Reality. The new Reality is that a fresh outpouring of God's Holy Spirit has been changing people's understanding of God, of the world, and of what it means to be a citizen of the world, for quite some time. It has been happening long enough now that large numbers of people in each of the great world religions are starting to hear the Spirit's call to a Great Convergence, where the world religions see beyond their differences and join hands to overcome the two greatest challenges the world has ever faced: nuclear annihilation and irreversible damage to our planet.

This is no Great Merger that God is calling us into, where all the religions blend into one, but a Great Convergence that brings all the great religions together to stand with God, Humanity, and the Earth itself in the hour of our greatest need.

I further believe that all of us who are present here today are all called by God to play a role in this Great Convergence. Do you not find it interesting that you could have been born into this world at any time and in any place, but God chose to bring you into the world at *this* particular time, in *this* particular place, and share community with *these* particular people? I believe God sent you into the world for many reasons, but one of them is surely to help God save the world, and bless the world. Save the world through leveraging the deep wisdom, vitality, and inspirational power of all the great world's religions on behalf of the world's future. And bless the world not only through achieving this goal, but by continuing to act as a wellspring of unity rather than division.

Do you hear this call? Can you see *it with your heart*? So can I. So can I.