

Forward into the Day
I Thessalonians 5:1-11; Psalm 123

Psalm 123

¹To you I lift up my eyes,

O you who are enthroned in the heavens!

²As the eyes of servants look to the hand of their master,

as the eyes of a maid to the hand of her mistress,

so our eyes look to the LORD our God,

until he has mercy upon us.

³Have mercy upon us, O LORD,

have mercy upon us,

for we have had more than enough of contempt.

⁴Our soul has had more than its fill

of the scorn of those who are at ease,

of the contempt of the proud.

I Thessalonians 5:1-11

¹Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anything written to you. ²For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. ³When they say, "There is peace and security," then sudden destruction will come upon them, as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape!

⁴But you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; ⁵for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness.

⁶So then let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober; ⁷for those who sleep sleep at night, and those who are drunk get drunk at night.

⁸But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation.

⁹For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, ¹⁰who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him.

¹¹Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.

The Sermon

Is there any good news out there?

In the footage, widely circulated in recent days, the fragile woman, elderly, seated in a wheelchair, is wearing earphones connected to a device held by a young man who is assisting her. The music playing is from Tchaikovsky's ballet Swan Lake.

She starts to move a hand with the grace of a ballet dancer, but after a few seconds she puts her hand back down and shakes her head, as if to say, never mind; I can't do it; I don't remember; there's no point. She has a look on her face that seems to signal a resigned frustration.

But the music keeps playing, and the young man holds her other hand and kisses it supportively, and then, as if moved by some unseen force, her other hand again rises, and floats in the air gently with the music. And then the left hand joins the right as the muscle memory from a lifetime ago takes over.

For many seconds, still seated in her wheelchair, she reenacts the elegant motions of a trained dancer who knows this specific piece of music, and when she finally stops, a handful of people in the room applaud.

The footage makes it clear that she is in a care facility for people with dementia. She and the young man assisting her speak Spanish. It's a touching piece, which has gone around the world and has now been shared by millions on Facebook, YouTube and other media and social media and brought grateful tears to the eyes of many.

The dancer's name is Marta C. González.

Beyond that much information, which is not disputed, most of the identifying material provided with the video doesn't pan out.

So, there is good news:

Music still helps. True beauty is still truth, and truth is still beautiful.

People still demonstrate that at their core they remain deeply and gracefully human, no matter what stage or condition their life is in.

Loving and respectful caretakers still make the world go around.

There is more than enough breathtaking, soul-nourishing good news about the world God has made.

But a nagging sense persists that some can't seem to take "Yes" for an answer: that they can't quite trust the truth of good news to be good enough, so they package it in artificial wrapping to try to get you to feel awe or pity or interest....

No wonder so many people report feeling numb. Even true stories and genuine portraits of humanity come wrapped in cheap plastic these days.

Remember 20 years ago when inspirational emails would circulate, so you'd get these things in your inbox where the subject line would say, "Fwd: fwd: fwd: fwd: fwd: fwd: fwd," which indicated that the email

had been passed from one group to another to another and on and on until somebody had passed it on to you?

Two problems with those inspiring emails: for one thing, they were usually misleading or outright invented; second, even if there was a kernel of truth at the core, it was like somebody had decided that the truth of the story needed a little more pop.

I remember there was one about the origin of “Taps,” the bugle call, breathtaking in the simplicity of its stark beauty, among the most powerful melodies ever devised, sanctified by its use throughout the generations to bid a grateful farewell to those who have made the supreme sacrifice.

All right, that is crystallized truth and beauty. But somebody somewhere seems to have decided that it still wasn’t powerful enough; they had to invent some idiotic fiction about a father and son on opposite sides of the Civil War, and some impossible coincidence happens, and you’re supposed to get a lump in your throat, but it was all fiction, and totally unnecessary.

Suffice it to say that the details that accompany the video footage of the retired ballet dancer are not panning out. The supposed associations with ballet companies are invented; earlier footage of a young ballerina interspersed with the footage of Marta Gonzales are actually of somebody else dancing a different ballet.ⁱ

Which is too bad because there does not seem to be any doubt about the truthful grace of the recent footage of Marta Gonzales.

When even truth and beauty are presented in a package of manipulation, deceit, and outright lies, it’s enough to leave you wondering:

Is there really any good news?

To you I lift up my eyes,
O you who are enthroned in the heavens!
Our eyes look to the LORD,
until God has mercy upon us.

Our prayers are with those who are suffering the most, and those who are most vulnerable, in the turbulent waters of this pandemic.

Our prayers are with those who have been damaged by this election season—whether in their emotional lives, or in the midst of strained relationships, or with the simple incredulity and baffled disappointment over the fact that so many voted on the other side from wherever you are sitting. No matter who you are, that’s hard.

Our prayers are with anyone and everyone who can’t see the calendar roll over into a new year soon enough.

There is good news: world-changing, life-affirming good news, echoing throughout the cosmos and reverberating in our streets and in our homes, and saturating the minutiae of our lives.

In times that feel dark, good news needs torchbearers—not to tell everybody what to do; not to tell us what we need; but to lift up the light, to open the curtains, so that we can see for ourselves.

The world and its people don’t need self-proclaimed know-it-alls to come into their lives and tell them what’s right and true and good. They need someone to herald the day.

“You, beloved,” Paul wrote to the young, exemplary church in Thessalonica— “You are not in darkness; you’re all children of light and children of the day... We belong to the day.”

Next week is Christ the King Sunday, the culmination of our worship year. It’s been a year since the last observance of that day in the

liturgical calendar when we focus on the sovereignty of God—the reign of Christ—over all earthly rulers and worldly leaders.

How did we do during these most remarkable 12 months, in terms of being subjects of Christ the King, the Prince of Peace? How did you do?

The Sunday following Christ the King is when it starts all over: the beginning of Advent, when we remember how God was born into human life—into the brutality of a world where children are sacrificed to political goals, and kings and princes and prime ministers and presidents and congresses and parliaments jostle for political advantage, and you’d better hope and pray they remember the billions of human lives that are at stake and at their mercy.

Someone recently shared a quote with me: “Peace comes with whole-hearted, unrestricted cooperation with reality.”ⁱⁱ

That was from a Jungian analyst who deals in helping people face themselves and the realities of their lives. As such, it’s equally applicable to all of humankind, right now:

“Peace comes with whole-hearted, unrestricted cooperation with reality.”

There is good news to share, and you are equipped with it, and sent by God into the world to carry it as a torch, to bring light into dark places.

That light doesn’t work, the torch doesn’t enlighten anything, when we pretend that it’s not needed, that the darkness is to be expected and that the light is nice but inconsequential.

The torch doesn’t affect anything when we pretend that all statements and behaviors are equally good, right and true regardless of whether they reflect the Bible’s insistent call for justice and humanity and mercy;

The light enlightens nothing if we remain in the darkness that says all actions are equally worthy of Christian discipleship regardless of whether they reflect Christ's fierce demands that we love our neighbor as we love ourselves, and that we follow him to the ultimate self-sacrifice of the cross in order to be faithful to God by serving humankind.

The good news is: there is good news.

It is truer than our news reports, more real than all the data available in our systems, more crucial than the politically and economically motivated, artificial inflammation of our differences, more compelling, convincing and conclusive than any standard of what it means to be human that puts myself at the center of the universe and disregards the well being of the rest of God's creation.

We belong not to the darkness, but to the day.

“For God has destined us not for wrath, but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that we may live with him.

“Therefore encourage one another, and build each other up—as indeed you are doing.” Because there is a world of people out there who are at their wits' end, and are just begging God, or the universe, or you, or me, for mercy and for light. “For we have had more than enough of contempt.”

To you I lift up my eyes,

O you who are enthroned in the heavens!

As the eyes of servants look to the hand of their master,

as the eyes of a maid to the hand of her mistress,

so our eyes look to the LORD our God,

until he has mercy upon us.

Until God has mercy on us all.

Keith Grogg
Montreat Presbyterian Church
Montreat, NC
November 15, 2020

ⁱ <https://www.npr.org/2020/11/10/933387878/struck-with-memory-loss-a-dancer-remembers-swan-lake-but-who-is-she>

ⁱⁱ Unattributed