

"Hope & Prayer"

Scripture Passages: 1) Psalm 141:1-2
2) Revelation 8
3) Revelation 9

Read Revelation 9:

Horror Movies: I have never really taken in horror films, but these two chapters of Revelation sound like the script for a great horror film. What can these kinds of passages have to do with anything hopeful, much less God? What can these kinds of passages have to do with being the church? Do these horrific images have anything to do with our lives and how we live them? I think they do.

Living in a Horror Film: Quite a few of you have been in a war. Some of you have been to Iraq fairly recently. Do these images from Revelation really describe anything more horrific than what takes place in war or for that matter in our world every day? We have had horrific murders in the communities around us. Last weekend there was a large peace march in Kalamazoo and shortly after a couple of people were murdered. Horror! Do these Revelation passages describe something more horrific than what happens in a meth house? Do these Revelation images describe anything more catastrophic than what is taking place in Japan with the nuclear reactors? This week was the 25th anniversary of the reactor catastrophe in Chernobyl. People will deal with the effects of that disaster for as long as they are alive. The systematic rape of women continues to be a method used to demoralize and terrorize populations of people. In some respect we live in a horror film.

Personally, I know I try to shelter myself and my family from the horrors of this world. Even as I try to stay abreast of world events, I keep myself as isolated and safe as possible. I try to stay out of the horror film actively running all around me. I would imagine that is the case for many of us. Is it possible to be more pro-active than that?

John's Horror Film: As we approach these challenging texts today I think it is important to remember John's situation. John was in prison on the island of Patmos. He was experiencing significant persecution due to his faith. He desperately wanted to be pastoring the congregations he loved, but he couldn't. He also wanted to be physically present in those seven communities as they too were experiencing significant persecution. As congregations they were in their own horror film. As congregations they were in the midst of every evil the world had to offer.

Evil Surrounded: In chapters 6 and 7 Jesus began peeling the seven seals off the scroll representing God's Word. The first seal represented the conquering Christ. The next five seals were the great evils of war, famine, sickness, the persecution of the faithful and natural disasters. Then chapter 8 begins with the opening of the seventh seal, which ushers in a period of great silence.

We discussed how these passages teach us that the evils are surrounded. The evils do not win. The evil does not have the last word. God has the last word. The conquering, risen, death defeating Christ has the last word. The sovereign God of resurrection, salvation, redemption has the last word. So what happens in this period of silence as the last seal is opened?

Wafting Prayers: As chapter eight begins we realize that during the period of silence God receives and listens to the prayers of the faithful, to the prayers of John on the island of Patmos,

to the prayers of the congregations in Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, Laodicea, Paw Paw and every other faithful follower of Christ as they struggle along the path of joining in Christ's conquering work.

God hears our prayers. Our prayers waft up to God as a pleasing offering. God hears our cries as we pray for those suffering from natural disasters, from sickness, from famine, from war, from persecution. Our prayers do not go unheard.

The question is do we believe that? Do we believe that our prayers matter? Do we believe that God hears what we utter? When we speak those words every week, "Lord hear our prayer," do we believe that is exactly what is happening? Do we believe that our God, the God of all creation, the God of resurrection life hears our prayers? Is that a part of the foundation upon which we build our lives? Do we live trusting that God hears our prayer?

God Responds: At the end of the silence, after God has heard our prayers, what happens next? In chapter eight verse five we read, "Then the Angel filled the censer with fire from the Altar and heaved it to earth. It set off thunders, voices, lightnings, and an earthquake."

What the Revelation teaches us here is that God responds to our prayers. Our prayers do not go unheard. Our prayers actually lead to Divine action. I think many of us have a hard time believing that. This is a critical aspect to our faith journey; trusting that our prayers are heard and responded to by God. One of our prayers can be for God to help us to believe that, and then live our lives accordingly. We will begin to live quite differently as we trust that our prayers are both heard and responded to by God.

Persecution: What follows next are seven trumpet blasts, representing seven Divine proclamations or responses to the persecution taking place on earth. The images that follow are horrendous: death, torture, destruction, but for what purpose? We hear the purpose at the end of chapter nine, where we read, "The remaining men and women who weren't killed by these weapons went on their merry way—didn't change their way of life, didn't quit worshiping demons, didn't quit centering their lives around lumps of gold and silver and brass, hunks of stone and wood that couldn't see or hear or move. There wasn't a sign of a change of heart."

The six trumpet blasts described in these two chapters, returns us to the plagues in Egypt, as well as the prophetic passages of Joel, Ezekiel and Isaiah. The intention behind God's actions is to lead to a change of heart. God responds to our prayers with the intention of bringing about transformation, health, healing, new life, and resurrection; which as we talked about last week is the truth that life follows death.

But as humans to give ourselves to transformation, to becoming new, to being born again, is like torture, is like a huge locust with a stinging tail having its way with us. We resist giving ourselves to God's transforming work with every ounce of energy we have. We rather die than change. If you have had an alcoholic or drug addict in your life you know exactly what I am talking about. The reality is that we are all just like that, the issues are just different. We resist dying to old ways of living, so that we can experience new, beautiful, glorious resurrection life.

John's Revelation reveals our truth that even after the most horrendous experiences, even after war after war after war after war as humans we haven't changed; we refuse to live in new ways. As John points out, "There was not a sign of a changed heart." We know this horror movie because we are living it. It doesn't seem to matter what we experience most of the time we refuse to give ourselves to becoming new creatures.

The Final Trumpet Blast: Listen as the final trumpet sounds in chapter 11 verses 15 to 19.

Read Revelation 11:15-19.

The questions raised here, "Are we the people who have given ourselves to God?" Does God

reign in our lives? Does God reign here in our life together? Have we allowed the truth of the Gospel to transform our hearts? Have we joined with Christ in conquering the evil, the unhealth, the injustice, the sickness, the destruction? Are we praying as we do every Sunday for God's Kingdom to come, to come into our lives, our church, our community our world? Do we believe that our prayers lead to God's saving, transforming actions in the world? Do we pray that way?

Conclusion: In many ways we are living in a horror movie. Our prayers, however, waft up to God as a pleasing gift, joining us in the Divine work of bringing Resurrection, New Life, and Healing to the world. So let us live our lives in such a way that we join with God, rather than participate in the horror. Let us believe in the power of prayer to transform our own heart as well as the heart of the world. Amen.