

**Peace in Heaven**  
**Luke 19:28-42**  
**Palm Sunday, March 28, 2010**

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Thursday morning, as I got ready to go to work, a song came to me. It was a song I don't think I've thought about for nearly thirty years. The last time I heard it sung was at my grandfather's funeral. The reason we included it in his memorial service was because he sang it every time he went fishing.

My grandfather had emphysema from smoking Camel unfiltered cigarettes for sixty years. The disease was real, he died of it. When he sat around his house or walked in his yard, he wheezed and fought for every breath. As soon as he pushed off shore in a flat bottomed fishing boat, however, his breathing turned natural and unlabored. As he deftly paddled the boat around cypress knees and fallen pines, his shoulders would relax and he would sing the song that came to me this Thursday morning.

At first, I thought the arrival of the song meant I was missing my grandfather, but that didn't seem quite right. Then I considered the possibility that it was time to go fishing, and maybe it is, but that didn't quite capture the full reason the song was on my mind. Finally, I realized the song came from the Spirit for this sermon. Here is the chorus of the song: "It will be worth it all, when we see Jesus. Our trials will seem so small, when we see Christ. One glimpse of his dear face, all sorrows will erase, so bravely run the race, till we see Christ."

One of our most cherished hopes for heaven is that it will be a place where all sorrows are erased. We base this hope upon the testimony of Revelation 21:3-4. "He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away."

I trust this promise and yet I wonder how the residents of heaven feel about what goes on here on earth. The Bible says that God experiences a wide array of emotions. On the sixth day of creation, our Creator celebrated. On day seven, God rested. Throughout the Old Testament God is said to feel intense anger, deep compassion, pity, mercy and love. Our Sovereign is also described at times as jealous, zealous, weary, regretful and vengeful. In Hosea 11, God travels through the whole gamut of emotions. Speaking for the Lord, the prophet says, "my heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my fierce anger." Although this Biblical language is anthropomorphic, the attribution of human characteristics to a divine being, and some of it may be nothing more than the people of God projecting their emotions onto God, the descriptions of God's emotional make-up are so pervasive in Scripture, they must have meaning.

Certainly God's emotions are pure whereas ours are tainted by selfishness and human weakness. God is never petty, nor does the Lord allow emotions to cause Him to do evil. The All-Powerful One is not captive to adrenalin rushes or hormonal firestorms. Jehovah does not suffer from high blood pressure or temper tantrums, neither does the Creator get carried away with giddiness or drowned in despair by depression. The Almighty is not moody.

The Biblical record does seem to say, however, that God responds to events on earth with a healthy range of feeling. Often, nature conveys the Lord's pleasure or displeasure. On the day Jesus was baptized, for instance, heaven opened and a dove descended upon Jesus as God said, "this is my beloved son in whom I am well-pleased." A vastly different emotion is displayed by nature on the day of Jesus' crucifixion, however. Matthew says darkness covered the earth from noon until three as Jesus died on the cross and then the very earth shook as the skies and ground depicted the grief of God.

Although I can't prove it, I would think God's temperament would effect the mood of heaven. Whereas I picture heaven jumping for joy on the day of Jesus birth, I would think there was silence in heaven on the day our Lord was crucified. God's sorrow over the cost of salvation must have set the tone for all the saints and angels.

Jesus made only one reference to the emotional state of heaven. While telling the parable of the lost sheep, Christ announced that there would be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who needed no repentance. His language (more joy) would indicate that there are days when there is less joy. Furthermore, the words of Christ would underscore the idea that heaven is affected by what happens on earth.

That idea is also substantiated by a phrase shouted by Jesus' disciples during his triumphant entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. Luke reports that as Jesus descended from the Mount of Olives toward Jerusalem, his disciples laid their coats on the ground before his colt and joyfully shouted, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!" The same writer said that on the night of Jesus birth, the heavenly hosts cried "Glory to God in the highest heaven and peace on earth." Now, in the final week of Jesus' life, the disciples are heard crying out, "peace in heaven and glory in the highest." The message seems to be that on Christmas Eve, something happened in heaven to bring peace on earth, namely, the eternal Christ was wrapped in human flesh. On Palm Sunday, the message is, something is happening on earth that will bring peace in heaven, namely the willingness of Jesus Christ to go to the cross.

Since free will is a human prerogative, Jesus possessed it. If he didn't have the freedom to choose whether or not to stay faithful to God's voice, then Jesus' prayer in the garden was nothing more than pretending. As the moment of his torture grew closer, Jesus battled the natural desire to dodge the horror of the cross. Although God must have known Jesus would give his life, that fact was evidently shielded from the rest of heaven. The language indicates that there was a restlessness in heaven over whether Jesus would put in motion the chain of events that would take him to the cross for our salvation or run from the pain. All the saints and angels seem to be holding their breath in one great moment of cosmic tension. Will Jesus stay faithful to the end or run for his life? When the Lord descended into Jerusalem, all of heaven knew Christ had made the redemptive choice and breathed a sigh of relief. There was peace in heaven.

Jesus evidently felt that peace. Deep in his soul, he must have received a wondrous confirmation that his actions had brought jubilant pleasure to God for when the Pharisees told him to silence his raucous disciples, the Lord said, "If they were silent, the very stones would shout out." In other words, like many times throughout the Biblical narrative, all of creation was manifesting the emotional state of God. Christ's faithfulness had brought all of heaven to its feet. God was cheering his Son onward and the very rocks were carrying God's voice.

Then, in one of the most drastic shifts of emotion recorded in all of Scripture, Jesus moved from this scene of celebration to a time of weeping over the fact that the powers of earth had not caught the heavenly vision. God and God's heaven were at peace, but that had not yet translated to earth. Through his tears, Christ said to Jerusalem, "If you had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes."

One of the centerpieces of the Lord's Prayer is the petition that God's will might be done on earth as it is in heaven. In this one snapshot of time, we see Jesus doing God's will and bringing peace throughout heaven, while the earthly rulers defy the will of God and perpetuate deep conflict on the earth. Maybe the truth of the matter is that every day, heaven celebrates some events that happen here on earth and grieves over others.

I have no way of knowing whether heaven celebrated or mourned the passing of the health bill last week. I am confident, however, that it took no pleasure in the vitriol that was expressed between the advocates for the bill and

the protestors against the legislation that took place in the streets of our nation. Racist name calling, threats and acts of violence from people on both sides of the issue had to grieve the heart of God and drape the gates of heaven in mourning. I don't know why we always revert to the default setting of nastiness when we have different views on important matters. We become like school yard children. The low point, for me, happened in Columbus, Ohio when Chris Reichart accosted a disabled, retired civil engineer and Parkinson's patient by the name of Robert Letcher, inferred that the retiree was a deadbeat and threw money in his face while shouting insults at him. Mr. Reichart's actions were caught on video tape and sent around the world. Then folks who were for the bill began to threaten to harm Mr. Reichart's family. I don't know if this bill will help make anyone well, but the actions of people screaming at each other over this legislation has made me sick. And I suppose it has nauseated all of heaven.

On Wednesday, however, a small silver lining must have appeared above the streets of gold. For that is the day Chris Reichart apologized to Letcher and the rest of the world for what he called his shameful behavior. He said, he snapped and had no justification for his deplorable actions. Further, he made a donation to the Parkinson's foundation and sought other ways to make amends. Reichart said he heard about the rally on his favorite radio program and was invited to participate by a friend. He added that he will never again attend such an event because, in his words, "they bring out the worst in everyone." Amen.

A few weeks ago, I read about another event in the Washington Post that must have taken heaven through an even greater roller coaster of emotions. In 1981, a Georgetown student by the name of Catherine Schilling was murdered. Needless to say, the crime must have caused the angels to shudder. Police arrested Donald Gates for the crime. J Brooks Harrington successfully prosecuted the case and convicted Gates of the despicable act. He was sentenced to life in prison. There could not have been even the slightest peace in heaven over the conviction, however, for Mr. Gates was not the perpetrator of the crime. Last December, 28 years after the crime, DNA evidence proved Mr. Gates was innocent and he was released from prison. J. Brooks Harrington was notified that the man he had put in prison almost three decades ago was innocent.

Mr. Harrington, who is now an ordained Methodist minister, was broken by the news. He said that he felt sick for days in the aftermath of the finding. With more than a little fear and trembling, Harrington located Donald Gates and apologized, begged the man's forgiveness and pleaded with him to tell him what he could do to in some way make amends for the travesty done to his life. All the citizens of heaven must have been restless as they awaited Mr. Gates answer. And then it came.

So exceptional was Mr. Gates response, that the former prosecutor had the letter framed and keeps it on his desk so that every day he can be reminded of what true Christianity is. For Mr. Gates responded, "Rev. Harrington, I forgive you. I forgave you a long time ago. Now I consider you my friend. Your brother in Christ, Donald." And a wondrous peace arose in heaven.

The book of Hebrews indicates that we are surrounded by a whole host of heavenly witnesses who pull for us to do the will of God. Our actions, not only have major consequences on earth, they even affect the community in heaven. May we live this day and each day to come with an awareness that everything from our political behavior to our vocational activities, to our leisure pursuits to the way we respond to the household of faith, our next of kin and the least of these in our midst is viewed by all of heaven. May we live so as to contribute to peace on earth, peace in heaven and glory in the highest. Amen.