

## **Songs of Hope in Difficult Days**

**March 15, 2009**

### **Psalm 46:**

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea; though it's waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult.

There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High. God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved; God will help it when the morning dawns.

The nations are in an uproar, the empires totter; God thunders, the earth melts.

The God of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. Come, behold the works of God; see what desolations God has brought on the earth. God makes wars cease to the end of the earth; God breaks the bow, and shatters the spear; God burns the shields with fire." Be still and know that I am God! I am exalted among the nations, I am exalted in the earth." The God of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.

**John 2:13-21-** "The Passover was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the moneychangers seated at their tables. Making a whip of cords, Jesus drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the moneychangers and overturned their tables. Jesus told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making the house of my Father-Mother into a marketplace!" The religious authorities then said to Jesus, "What sign can you show us for doing this?" Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." The authorities then said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?" But Jesus was speaking of the temple of his body."

**Song:** My City of Ruins.

There can be no denying that these are difficult days we are living in. To begin with, somehow, discrimination has reared it's ugly head once again right here in Gainesville, and managed to get itself onto the March 24<sup>th</sup> ballot in the form of Amendment 1. Contrary to what angle people may be trying to take, there is not one word about 'bathrooms' in the proposed amendment. What it says is, 'the city charter shall be amended to prohibit protections and void existing ordinances based on sexual orientation or gender identity.' In my opinion this is a bogus attempt to write discrimination into our city charter, and I for one will not stand for it. What breaks my heart is that I even have to make the argument.

The days of roses and chocolates seem to have come to an end. New forms of old discriminations are not the only issue people are wrestling with. Financial markets have tanked. Two wars still rage on, in which our young men and women sacrifice themselves every day, fighting for a cause that doesn't even make it into the evening news anymore. When I look around, sometimes it feels like all I see is destruction. As the psalmist alluded to, the earth is changing, the mountains are shaking, and the nations are in an uproar.

Today's reading from John's gospel has been a good piece of contemplation for me these past few weeks. First off, I love the story of Jesus tearing through the temple, overturning money tables and chastising and driving out those people who were making a buck on people just trying to get their spirits in order. When I see this story through the framework of today, I have to wonder if that is what is happening. Sometimes I feel like the great American temple of excess and consumerism created by our culture and our society, is in the process of being purged.. Dare I say that it appears our culture has lost sight of what is truly important in life; that we have grown too rich as a nation, relying too much on our dollars to make sense of the looming challenges we must face, and changes we must make? At the current time, American consumer's debt is equal to our Gross Domestic Product. That means we are at 100% debt to profit ratio, as a country. That's not good news. There is only one other time in American history when we were at 100% debt. 1929. While it is true that the big corporate banks made catastrophic mistakes with sub prime mortgage agreements they never should have made, they can't take all the blame. No, in this great country of ours, we the people are allowed the freedom to make our own choices; and unfortunately for millions of us, the choices we have made have us in debt up to our teeth.

Jesus tearing up the temple is good food for thought in the face of the financial news of the day, but then what about that second part of the story? How do you think it went over in the temple of Jerusalem when, after Jesus tore the place up, he says, 'Tear this temple down and in three days I will raise it up again?'

Now, the discerning minds among you might be saying, 'Oh Andy, that's just John (or whoever wrote the gospel of John) giving us a little foreshadow of the Easter story.'

The history buffs among us might be saying, 'Ah ha! The gospel of John, eh? Well according to some, John's gospel was first written about year 90 in the Common Era. And you know what was fresh on their minds, don't you? The Roman destruction of the temple in Jerusalem, in 70 CE. That's just John (or whoever wrote the gospel of John) talking about the establishment of the Christian church as the fulfillment of the Messianic prophecies.

And finally, the Biblical scholars among us (both of you) might be saying, "This quote from today's Biblical reading is echoed in all four of the gospels. That only happens 15% of the time. If you're going to find similar stories, more often they're first told in Mark, then flourished and spiced up a bit in Matthew and Luke, but old John is almost always the odd man out. This quote reiterates the importance of the Easter story to the early Christian communities. Did you notice the little author's note thrown in there ("but Jesus was speaking of the temple of his body")? That's just the followers of the Johanne Community (the people who wrote the Gospel of John) mentioning that they too rely heavily on the hopeful word of resurrection in challenging and difficult days. All valid points.

Now let me put this quote in a contemporary context for you.

Can you imagine if then mayor Rudy Giuliani, or then President George Bush had stood in the ruins of the twin towers on September 11<sup>th</sup> and shouted into his bullhorn, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up!”

Can you imagine if New Orleans mayor Ray Nagin stood on the levees of the Mississippi, and shouted into the winds of Hurricane Katrina, “Destroy this city, and in three days I will raise it up!”

Can you imagine if Secretary of the Treasury Tim Geithner, or President Barack Obama went into the halls of congress, or into the pit at the NYSE and shouted out, ‘Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up!’”

We’d think they were nuts.

My faith is not from the apocalyptic vein; meaning I don’t believe God is punishing us for our wicked ways, in the same way I don’t believe God destroyed the city of New Orleans for its devious behaviors and reputations. No, God has nothing to do with the poor financial choices we make. When Jesus went tearing through the temple it wasn’t because the Roman Empire or the state of Israel was on the brink of a financial collapse, or because unemployment was at a 20 year high. He was ticked off that the church had become a marketplace. His was an ideological argument that I believe we still wrestle with today.

But this quote, ‘tear this temple down and I will rebuild it in three days’ highlights for me what is most important during this time of Lent. That even in destruction, there is hope. From loves lost, to layoffs, to social justice issues, to financial turmoil there is hope.

In our denomination, the United Church of Christ, we proclaim to be an Easter people. We are a people of the empty cross. We don’t dwell on the brokenness of God’s creation, we give thanks for the places where healing and wholeness can and do happen. The UCC is a denomination that finds hope in an empty tomb, joy in the springtime of our faith, salvation in the belief that death and destruction does not have the last word.

And I believe that this passionate hope for tomorrow is echoed in our church here as well. It is the hope of the phoenix rising again from the ashes, the gift of forgiveness offered by a loved one. It is the hope and the joy and the smiles that we share during our time with the children, or the blessing that we take part in, when we open our church home to those who have no home.

There are those who will dwell on destruction. When the temple leaders scoffed at Jesus comment about 3 days, saying, ‘It took 46 years to get this far,’ they were taking the short view. They were grounded in a reality that deserved to be destroyed. They couldn’t get past the literal interpretation of three days. What the message says to me is that it doesn’t take bricks and mortar to rebuild a temple to God. It takes heart and soul, and a firm foundation of hope for tomorrow.

God is in the midst of the city, the psalmist said.

The city shall not be forgotten. God will help it when the morning dawns.

Come and behold the works of God.

I believe the message of Easter, and the journey of Lent, are here to give us the power and the resources to make it through the longest night to the promise of a new day dawning. In the destruction, there is the promise of hope.

The refrain from that powerful song that Adam sang, a song I first heard after 9-11, echoes out through ages as an ancient melody of grace. Rise up! Use these hands; with these hands, create a better tomorrow. Rise up, in a city of ruins. Rise up in the face of fear. Rise up, and sense again that hopeful tomorrow that is the Easter promise. It's an inspiring word of hope, and grace filled melody, a song of life that can help to sustain us during these difficult three days, three weeks, three months, three years, however long it might take for the hopeful time to come again.

Until that day, I encourage you to work towards hope with your own two hands. I encourage you to work for the preservation of the rights for all people here in our own city. I encourage you to reach out and help those people you know who are going through difficult times, in relationships, in their jobs, in their homes. I encourage you to find hope for tomorrow in the good things we can do for others, today. And I encourage you to raise the sails of your own spiritual vessel, in patient expectation for the next great gust of grace to come your way.

Amen.

O God,

The heart of the city can sometimes be a frightening place. When the morning dawn so slow in coming, some days it can feel like there might be no light at all. The earth shakes, the psalmist said, and the mountains tremble. But we still find hope somewhere; somehow.

When it feels like the darkness might last forever, or this burden carried might never let up; suddenly the morning birds call their first songs to the dawn; and two hands reach out to help lighten the load.

When the buzz and the busyness of the day forget to keep up their distractions, and a blessed moment of peace descends upon the world, there you are. When the evening strolls into dusk, and the crickets sing out their chirping chorus, there you are. You are with us in an evening cup of tea, and a gentle nuzzle from thoughtful pet. You are there in a distant melody long forgotten, or a soothing song that catches the heart and brings a blessed tear to the eye.

You are with us, o God, even when we hardly sense you are there. And for this no words can ever fully express thanks.

Amen.