

“Robes Washed Clean”
Rev. Dr. Scott Paczkowski

My first church was in northern Wisconsin. It was an odd place, because you had tourists and you had the chain of 10 lakes that were absolutely beautiful; but, in the midst of all of that, you had farmers, and they were cranberry farmers. They are a little different stripe and, in about the 1940's, they went up to this place that had nothing and, with shovels and hands, literally dug their way to fortune, bit by bit, digging those bogs out so that they could grow the cranberries.

I had one of them tell me how he saw God *in* his growing; in the growth that takes place every early spring as those bogs come alive. They start coming alive even before you see them. It's underneath the ground and, believe me, in northern Wisconsin where there are *nine months of winter*, it gets brutal. He said even there, underneath the ground, while there is still snow on the ground, the plants are moving. They are growing. They are developing and they are popping through the hard seed, and starting to force their way up against everything that is tough and difficult – that hard frozen ground. Even with snow you can't see them at work, but you can see it happening, because you know that by a certain date and that in northern Wisconsin is *mud month* – which is the end of April – when it all starts to melt and you have nothing but *mud* everywhere. All of a sudden, it seems like overnight, those plants pop through on the bogs; but it wasn't overnight. It had been happening for four or five weeks underground in that hard-crusting ground, frozen solid. Still, life would not stop and would continue to move up, until cranberries pop out, above the ground, and life finds a way.

This is what this passage is about in Revelation: Life finds a way. Through the hardest, most-difficult parts in the world, God finds a way. Now you may not see it. It may be like that plant underneath the ground in the earliest of spring. You can't see the growth, but it is happening. That is what we are going through right now. That is what these last 2000 years and maybe, Lord knows, how much longer [have been like]. God's time is not ours and I wish God's time was our time, it would all be done a whole lot faster. But a thousand years is like a second to God. Well, it's going to take a little time. The last 2000 years have been just a couple of seconds, so it's getting a little frustrating. But God is at work, pushing life out of that hard-caked ground and when it happens, new life – eternal life – and God's heavenly kingdom will happen.

Boy, that is hard to believe in the midst of so much pain. You go all of the way back to the book of Exodus and you see how God's people are trying to follow God, in the midst of so much injustice, while we wait for God's new life to pop up into the world.

You had Pharaoh. Some of the pharaohs were wonderful. There wasn't just one pharaoh, there were as many as we have had presidents and more, because they had gone on for such a long period of time. They were an amazing empire – the Egyptians – and by the time that the book of Exodus had been written, early in ancient Israelite lore, there was one particular pharaoh who was incredibly cruel. Before this particular pharaoh, the people of Israel – the Israelite people – had had a certain amount of autonomy. They might have been outsiders.

They may not have had full citizenship, but at least they were allowed to exist and have their own property, even some of their own businesses.

But this pharaoh took away everything from all of the outsiders, including the Israelites. He first took away their ability to earn a living and then, when they couldn't pay for their mortgages, he took their homes. Then, he found a way to give them just enough that he put them all into debt; and, when they couldn't pay their debts, then he enslaved them. That's how the Israelites, all of a sudden, become slaves overnight. It was through evil laws put into place by Pharaoh, that slowly moved the people from autonomy to slavery. And then, each and every step along the way, the Israelites' lives became more burdensome. You go, all of a sudden, and Pharaoh gets angrier, because they can't crank out enough bricks.

The reason that Pharaoh did that wasn't necessarily that he was scared of the Israelites, or that he even hated them. Pharaoh needed an army of slaves so vast that he could build his empire, so that he could build all of the amazing things that we still see today in Egypt. He needed this huge, huge army of slaves in order to make that happen. So, he manipulated laws. He manipulated all of this, to slowly turn this autonomous group of people into slaves, so that he could build the empire. Then, when they weren't able to build their bricks fast enough, he took away their straw to make them work harder. He put them into such pain, that they thought they had no hope.

It didn't even register with me until I just started a book by Walter Brueggemann. (Man, he is a Presbyterian saint. He was a professor at Columbia Seminary in Georgia for years and years and years – just a wonderful professor and theologian. He has written a number of books.) He said, "Silence, in the midst of injustice, is the thing that destroys us. It is when we cry out against injustice that God acts, God responds. God does something about it."

He said this example in Exodus is one example of that. This has been going on for decades, if not hundreds of years and then, all of a sudden it gets so bad, especially with the taking away of the straw, that the people start to cry out. Some of them might have even been saying, "God, where are you, do you even exist? How dare you put us through this?"

God didn't care what they said, but he heard their cry. They were silent to the injustice no more. God responded and, in just a few short years, Moses comes along – the prophet who would take the people out of their bondage. He took them back, and gave them their autonomy back in the wilderness, and then finally to the Promised Land.

Now, that is an ancient story, thousands and thousands and thousands of years ago. How can you relate to that? How can I relate to that? How can any of us really relate to that story?

Then I found another story written in *The Washington Post* by their foreign correspondent, Pamela Constable. She is still there. She was stationed in Pakistan recently, and she found this entire group of people throughout Pakistan who make and bake bricks. Wow! In Pakistan today there are over two hundred thousand people baking and making bricks. These families live next to the sites where they make the bricks. The fathers and the small children make the bricks, while the mothers stay at home because of the Muslim's society. The young boys and their fathers mold the bricks into shape. The little boys start the process and the fathers formalize it. Then they harden it. It is a process. As they get hard

enough, the older boys, on carts, wheel – at great heft – the bricks that are formed over to the donkeys and other animals. They load them and carry them off, to start building homes and other [buildings].

These people – families – two hundred thousand (when I say that I'm talking about the fathers) families live there in that hot, baking sun. There are no eight-hour days. There are no coffee breaks, and there are no lunch hours. They can go ten to twelve, or sometimes fourteen hours, or more per day – every day.

You look at them, she said, and there are burn scars all over their arms and legs. The average life expectancy in these villages is less than 60 years old, because of the harsh conditions they are under, baking bricks in almost the exact same way that the Israelites did in Egypt, in the Exodus.

So, they go about moving this along and they say, “How did this happen?” And, she said, “This isn't the end of the story,” as she told the other editors of *The Washington Post*.

What happens is that the more wealthy people in Pakistan needed something else. They needed body parts. So, they own these people, or they are just about owned by the company, or the factory, that makes the bricks.

So they organize the system, in which they pay them a few hundred rupees every month – that is pennies. Then, what they do is, they have a company store, and the company store is just like the ones in the coal mines back in the '30s, '40s and '50s in West Virginia. They [the workers] would pay for things like blankets or maybe, God forbid, a little bed; and, when they would go into debt the company would own them.

The only way that these people could ever get out of debt, receiving just a couple of hundred rupees, would be when the factory owners would invite their friends in, and their friends happened to own a company that would take human kidneys, and then sell them in Europe and around the first world. The way these people in Pakistan would get out of debt is by offering one of their healthy kidneys. So many of the fathers in Pakistan have only one kidney. They created a system between one friend to another friend to take away the right and the hope of an entire group of people. That wasn't enough, they also wanted a part of their body as well.

What is the difference between what is happening now and what happened then, thousands and thousands of years ago, except that at least the Israelites kept their kidneys? How horrific a time we live in if we are poor, and do not have a voice. The only hope we have in a sinful world, with sinful people, with corrupt selfish, gluttonous people, who want it all, is God. The promise of the book of Revelation is that life will come out of the barrenness and that there will be hope. The promise that the least of us in God's Heaven, when that promise breaks through the surface and God's Kingdom comes again, is that the last will be first and the first will be last.

On this D-Day, I always think of the book of Revelation on D-Day, because those who sacrificed their lives and whose uniforms – no matter what uniform they were wearing – that are drenched in blood will be made glistening white again. Just like those Pakistani men with their burn scars and their kidney scars, with the blood left on the surgical table,

will have their gowns and their souls glistening white, when Christ comes again. And the only thing we can do is to speak out against these injustices when we read them in different articles. When we hear about them on the news, we can pray about it and speak about it, because, as Walter Brueggemann said, it's not until God hears our screaming that change happens. So, I'm screaming for help for the Pakistanis – the poorest of the Pakistani people – who are laying bricks today. I scream that injustice, and I pray that God hears, so that the second coming of God, and that the light, will come out of that hard, sinful dirt of our world and bring life anew.

That's what the prophets did. They screamed to God, so that God could hear and respond. That is what we are called to do. To scream, "help!" and then do what we can do to respond. When we do that the second coming pushes out, up and into the light just a little bit sooner.

That's why I have asked that we take just a moment before we go to Communion and we sing two verses of "Let Us Talents and Tongues Employ." I love that phrase "Our Hearts and Tongues Employ," because it will remind us to use our tongues to speak out so that God can listen, and the silence will not be the rule of the day. Amen.