



The Gift of God

Psalm 23 & Revelation 7:9-17
Easter 4 - May 8, 2022
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It is Mother's Day and as a culture, we turn to our mothers and demonstrate our appreciation for their place in this world and in our lives. It could be said and has been said that mothers are the givers of life, bearing children and then bearing with children as they grow up. There is much truth to this statement, but ultimately, as thankful as we are or might be for our mothers, God is ultimately the giver of life. That is not to say that mothers or the celebration of Mother's Day is an attempt to usurp the place of God. We can certainly give thanks for our mothers and still turn to the ultimate giver of life.

The passages that the lectionary selects for this day combines to further this assertion about God as the ultimate giver. We are told directly in the passage from Revelation and indirectly in the well-known Twenty-third Psalm, that God is the giver of salvation along with being the giver of life.

In far too many theologies rampant amongst Christians of all stripes is the rather agnostic and deistic belief that God is certainly the giver of life, but then humankind is left on its own in regards to both their physical fate upon the earth and their eternal blessedness. Even those who believe that God has been active in Jesus Christ sometimes draw up short of the great testimony that is offered in the often, but needlessly feared, Book of Revelation. Here's the line to which I refer:

They cried out in a loud voice, saying, 'Salvation comes from our God upon the throne and the Lamb.'

Too many folks believe that salvation does not come from God at all, but rather from their own efforts rather in the deeds that they offer or in the thoughts that they hold. In short, they believe that it is either by the work of attempting to be righteous and as perfectly God-like as they can be or in even more dangerous belief that it is what they believe or confess or profess as doctrinal formulations that merit God's salvation, peace and grace.

Clearly, the witness of scripture is that salvation belongs to God; it comes from God as a gift through the action of Jesus Christ and the mediation of his ever-abiding Holy Spirit. Clearly it is not what we do that merits God's gift of salvation nor is it what we believe. Both what we do and what we believe are the outgrowth of this great gift of salvation, wholeness, and peace in life, rather than the cause of it. God is ultimately the cause of it and it is this God who calls us to live our lives in response to this good and glorious news of his good and glorious gift in Jesus Christ.

Jurgen Moltmann, the great German theologian whom I have been reading a lot of lately, holds that this salvation that God grants is an alternation not just of our eternal destiny, but rather a radical alternation to our approach to life ... all because of the One who the religious authorities of the time named 'godless', Jesus Christ himself. Here's what Moltmann writes:

The new righteousness of God is manifested in the ‘godless’ death of the Son of God and with the outcasts are accepted, the unrighteous are made righteous and justice is secured for those without rights.

It’s obvious to me that Moltmann holds that something radically different is offered to us in the salvation that comes from God that breaks the typical cycle of reciprocity and human ambition rampant in our world. Here, Jesus Christ changes our lives by his actions both in the world and quite frankly in our hearts. We begin to live this life differently. This, too, is the salvation that comes from God: a life lived in response to God’s goodness.

Moltmann goes on a few paragraphs later to describe what human life can be like with the gift of this salvation, this wholeness and peace that comes from God:

Anyone who lives from and for the righteousness of Christ will, like Jesus, be ‘reckoned with transgressors;’ for he no longer believes and follows the protective gods of those legal systems of life. He no longer accepts the inescapability of that law and its consequences. Since he has been forgiven, he will forgive. Since he has received good for evil, he will repay evil with good. Since, even when he was the enemy of God, God loved him, he will love his enemies.... Anyone who follows the ‘godless’ Son of God because is believing to live from his self-giving, sees that no one becomes righteous through the law.

If salvation is not gained by our work or our believing, but rather is a gift from God that causes within us the good work of mercy and grace and the faith of belief, then this opens up our lives to actually be lived in love and joy. This is no doubt why the scripture refers to this gift as re-birth, being brought again into the light and set upon a path that affirms both the God that gives life and the life that we have received. Then, we can really live.

Probably one of the best illustrations of such Christian approach to life, actually seeing that God calls us to live the life we have been given and not waste it, comes from the British television crime-drama ‘Grantchester.’ The series is based upon a series of novels that centers around a young Anglican vicar in a the small English village of Grantchester in the 1950’s. He preaches good sermons, offers sound pastoral advice, and assists the local constabulary with the solving of an alarming amount of murders.

At the end of an early episode, having experienced writer’s block in sermon preparation, Sidney Chambers stands in the middle of the chancel on a Sunday morning and just speaks from the heart to his congregation. He delivers a marvelous and memorable sermon. This is part of what he said:

We cannot erase our past; no matter how hard we try. Instead we must carry our past with us into the future; we carry the past with us and look forward with hope. We look forward for to look backward is to waste precious time.

Someone recently said to me that we should live now as we have never lived before. And we must, all of us take heed and live as we have never lived. For we are all mortal, we are all fragile and we all live under the shadow of death.

In Jesus Christ, our lives have been opened to a future that God holds; the gift of salvation right here and right now that we might live with an openness that recognizes we have a past, but in Christ we have both this moment and the future he owns. This is the gift of God – God’s salvation of our lives so that we might really live in response to his goodness and towards the hope that we have in God. Let us then live with an openness to one another, to the life we have been given, but most of all, an openness to the God from whom salvation comes as a gift.