WORKING OUT OUR SALVATION WITH FEAR AND TREMBLING

--a sermon by the Rev. H. Paul Santmire
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Two texts this morning, both from Philippians 2; the first suggests the main focus of this sermon: "Therefore, my beloved..., work out your own salvation with fear and trembling." (2:12) The second text points to the goal of my thoughts, and I will accordingly turn to it only at the very end: "Likewise you should also be glad and rejoice with me." (2:18)

A U.S. Senate committee has lately been holding some informal hearings about cults in American life. As I read the press accounts, those hearings sound to me like so much whistling in the dark.

Why? Because behind those hearings lie the events of Jonesville. And therein lies a story of portents that cannot readily be dealt with as Americans are wont to deal with difficult situations, by appointing a committee.

For a few stark moments, when the story of the suicides and the murders at Jonesville began to parade across the front pages, many people, perhaps all of us, were mesmerized with a certain dull sense of horror. We were shaken, if you will, by a profound kind of fear and trembling.

Then, as that aweful cover of death on Time magazine gave way to images of other crises, -- some other hero, some other villain, some other clash of conflicting interests, -- Jonesville began to fade from the national consciousness. Throw in a Senate hearing now, which might easily end up linking Jonesville and other so called cults to Marxism, communism, and various dark forces hostile to the pristine innocence of American life, and we will have come full circle to business-as-usual, where we were before Jonesville happened.

But I do not think that the horror of those Jonesville moments will so easily go away, for any of us. We will be living with those memories of the fear and the trembling we experienced then, for some time to come, just as some of us have been living with the memory of Lt. Galley and Mai Lai for some time.

Of course, this is not, as such, the fear and trembling that Paul talks about in Philippians 2, which I want to discuss with you this morning. But to understand Paul's injunction to work out our salvation with fear and trembling, I think we need to be much more honest with ourselves than we sometimes have been in the past.

So I have chosen to approach our texts obliquely this morning, by beginning with some somber undertones, and then, and then only, starting to give utterance to the joyous chords that we all know are ringing out from Philippians, chapter 2, for all who have ears to hear.

I.

The point I want to make about Jonesville is simple enough, although it may sound strange to some ears. It comes to expression in the New Testament most succinctly in Ephesians 6:12: "For we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the p principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places."

Or to say the same thing in more accessible terms, but no less truthfully: I remember a conversation I once had with a certain three-year old about his dreams the night before.

"Were they good dreams or Bad dreams", I inquired.

"Bad dreams."

"Oh," I said with interest.

"Yes, you and mommy died, and the house was filled with monsters."

Two-hundred years ago, in the hey-day of the Enlightenment — that era of light, reason, and progress -- it was fashionable to look upon such sentiments about monsters in one-dimensional terms. To perceive your house as threatened by death and the terrors of death was thought to be a distasteful lapse into childish — or primitive! — irrationality.

The other side of that Enlightenment world view, which, as you know is still in evidence these days, even within sneezing distance of this Chapel -- the other side of that commitment to progress and the turning away from the threats of death, was the conviction that now, finally, after all those dark ages, humanity -- or as people said in those days, mankind -- had taken charge of its own destiny: humanity is in charge of human history, not the irrational traditions of the past: the day of enlightened self-government in every sphere has dawned.

But you know the story: Externally, the Enlightenment dream was smashed into a thousand pieces, like a wonderful mirror that accidently fell on to the stone terrace. It was smashed by the events of Western history themselves.

The very nation that was founded on the self-evident truths of reason in 1776, involved itself throughout its early history in bloody, genocidal wars against the Indians, and built its economic prowess in its expansionist period on the backs of thousands of black slaves, dragged from their homes in Africa, beaten into inhuman submission by the interests of plantation owners in the South and money changers in the North.

Later, back on the continent, in the enlightened nation of Kant and Goethe, the people came under the sway of powers that sought the death of the whole Jewish population, and the extinction of gypsies and homosexuals, as well. And the whole virulent intent of holocaust was nearly a success.

Meanwhile, in the New World again, still in the name of progress and reason, the people mustered themselves to fight such forces of darkness as they perceived in the Nazis and the attacking Japanese. To this end, however noble, a nuclear arsenal was unleashed that burned out the lives of thousands and thousands of civilians in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, for no apparent military purpose, and left us with a legacy of the mushroom cloud on our horizons, the threat of thermonuclear annilihilation, ever since.

The age of the Enlightenment has been shattered by the powers of darkness, again and again. So should we have been so suprised? Should the Mai Lai massacre by good American boys havebeen such a shock? Likewise regarding the story of the Kool Ade and cyanide, and the knives and the machine guns at Jonesville: Should that have come as such as shock to us?

Internally, the story has been similar. Sigmund Freud revolutionized our thinking about ourselves when he discovered what St. Paul and St. Augustine and many others had long known, and what any three-year old will tell you free for the asking: that our conscious life is but the tip of the iceberg, that, underneath the surface, the lives of all of us are filled with swirling, dark forces, amoral energies,that are no respecter of persons. This holds true even for the mildest among us, according to Freud, even the most lawbiding and caring of citizens. Each one of us carries the energies of darkness around inside us, in our very souls.

The doctors of the Church used somewhat different language to describe this "mass of perdition," terms such as "original sin" and "the power of the Devil." [1]

If all this is true, then I can imagine myself (particularly now as a religious leader) saying of that driven, possessed figure, the Rev. Jim Jones, "there but for the grace of God go I."
For the powers of darkness engulf our history, and dwell in all our souls.

Hence the authenticity of this Pauline statement in Ephisians:
"For we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in heavenly places."

II

It's in this context that Paul's great hymn of praise to Christ, in Philippians 2, begins to show forth its deepest meanings.

Sometimes you and I, for whatever reasons, tend to domesticate Jesus. Sometimes Jesus becomes for us, as it were, the nice man next door, who-'-s the son of the old nice man who lives upstairs in the sky. Or perhaps Jesus becomes the moral crusader who jumps on the bandwagon of the latest political projects we support.

Not so for Paul. This is no domesticated Jesus we see here in Philippians 2. This is the awesome cosmic Christ, whose arena of struggle is with the principalities and powers of death that so permeate our experience.

I wish i could take each one of you by the hand and lead you into any one of dozens of Eastern Orthodox basilicas I once visited in Yugoslavia and Greece.

I was brought up in Churches which had romantic, sometimes sentimental portraits of Jesus behind their altars, -- Jesus the Lice man, the light-haired, spotless shepherd calling the little children to him in a setting of pastoral beauty. So when I first began to encounter these orthodox basilicas and their representations of Christ, I didn't know quite what to make of them. But now I think I know, much better than I once did.

You enter a rectangular space that seems conventional enough, with figures of saints on the walls and with the aroma of incence giving you only a hint of what is to come.
Then, almost without knowing when, you enter the space underneath the towering central dome of the basilica. And there in the dim reaches above, you see the awesome face of Christ looking down at you, done in a simple, but over-powering mosaic. This is the cosmic Christ, whose powers extend to all things, visible and invisible.

With our eyes so tutored, I hope that we can now begin to see in a fresh way the universal sweep of the cosmic drama that Paul sings about in Philippians 2, as he draws the words of an early Christian hymn.

We see a vision here that depicts an immense flow of Divine evergy, from the Eternal Life of God that envelops and transcends the universe; into our own time and space, then imploding in the self-giving life of one of us, the One who was obedient unto death, even death of the cross; and then finally we see all this glorious Divine evergy being lifted up and exploded, as it were, throughout the whoId creation, for all to see who have eyes to see, as the victorious power of life that will one day triumph over all the darkness of human experience. That's the kind of vision I think Paul is suggesting in Philippians 2.

But listen to his own words about Christ --
"...who, although he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself" (literally: poured himself out), "taking the form of a servant, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross."
Then Paul reaches the climax of his quotation: "Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

So, according to Paul, the mysterious principalities and powers of death, which so destructively permeate our experience, both externally and internally, have been overcome--and they are being overcome—through the even more mysterious and still more powerful energies of God's eternal love, as it flows into the world through the cross, and then is made available everywhere
through the exaltation of Christ.

Thafs Paul's vision. He takes the destructive reign of the princi-palities and powers of death, throughout history and in the inner lives of all of us, with utmost seriousness. You will never find Paul plastering over, or somehow sidestepping, the issue of radical evil in human experience. He stares starkly at the faceless powers of death.

But beyond this, his vision of redemption is commensurate with, no, even larger than, his vision of death and its terrors. For Paul, the cosmic flow of God's love quenches the fires of evil, and sews new seeds of life for a renewal of all things.

Hence Paul proclaims in I Corinthians 15: "0 Death, where is thy

sting!" The stranglehold of death has been broken.

III.

Let's rest for a moment now. I have the feeling that Paul's direct approach to the mysteries of death and the terrors of death, and his almost ecstatic, un-domesticated approach to the drama of cosmic redemption in Christ, may strain our minds and tax our hearts to the limits.

Yet at the same time, Paul pulls us on, too, as if we already haven't been given enough to think about. Indeed, if we didn't move on here, we would miss that very personal address of Paul that translates everthing that we've seen so far into terms that each one of us can recognize,

Paul has already said in chapter one, "For me to live is Christ, to die is gain." It now becomes clear how that intimacy with Christ is to take shape in our lives: with fear and trembling. Having just finished his glorious hymn to Christ, Paul now writes: "Therefore, my beloved..., work out your own salvation with fear and trembling."

Clearly what Paul is saying here is not that we should try to save ourselves from death and the terrors of death that dwell within us. Anyone who knows what Paul knew about the powers and the havoc of death, on the one hand, and the cosmic mission of Christ from eternity into time, in order to triumph over death's stranglehold on us all, -- anyone who knows these things knows that for Paul salvation is from God alone, not from us in any respect.

So what does he mean, then? To work out our salvation with fear and trembling.... I venture to summarize his meaning this way: that as persons whom God has incorporated into Christ, you and I can now feel free to internalize the cosmic drama of Christ as our own story.

To begin with, you and I are free to stare at the powers and principalities of destruction, and to see them for what they are: real, but done for. For we know that however horrible they still are, whether we read about them in the daily press or in the pages of our own dreams, God has triumphed over them in Christ, once and for all. As members of Christ, you and I are therefore free to face up to evil; we don't need to flee from it or try to repress it, as if it were somehow too large, too gross, for anyone to deal with.

Berthold Brecht once observed that when he came upon a placid fishing village-- bathed in sunlight, white against the deep blue waters-- that he was not overcome by any romantic feelings: instead, he saw the torn fishing nets. So as Christians you and I are prepared to see the dark side of human history-- the struggle with death and the terrors of death, the torn fishing nets-- and the dark sides of our own personal histories, as well, for we know that these forces no longer have a stranglehold over us.

Now to do this, to face up to the torn fishing nets, is no simple matter. It will take all the courage you and I can muster. Nor will we sail through untouched, as it were. There will be much fear and trembling, much anxiety and soul-searching and withering of our resolve. But the death of Christ makes it <- possible for us to persevere, to be radically honest about radical evil.

And more. As people who have been incorporated into Christ, you and I are free not only to internalize his encounter with the powers of darkness, we are also free to make the triumph of his life over death, our story as well as his.

It is sometimes assumed around here that death is a reality which doesn't visit such a lovely plac'e as the Wellesley campus. Not a few people hereabouts work overtime trying to make this place look positively immortal! But we all know that death is no stranger here -- from the private stories of anguish some of us hear from our friends, to the more public narratives such as the story of our sister, Claire Crowley, whom we will remember together this Thursday.

I mention all this not to further draw out the picture of death, but for another purpose. In such contexts, I must say, I am continually amazed, doubting Thomas that I am,-- I am continually amazed by the power of the'Gospel. I am continually amazed that the Gospel is still possible, as it was for Paul: that it's possible for those who identify their lives with Christ's, not only to live with him through the valley of the shadows, but, in the midst of it all, to be able to lift up their tearful eyes with thanksgiving.

By the grace of God, these Christian brothers and sisters know and trust that Christ has sanctified the life of the loved one who has died, through his own death and his triumph over death.

So people like you and me — some of you, I know-- can and do internalize the cosmic drama of Christ, not only with regard to the cross, but also with regard to his resurrection. I have seen it happen. I know it can happen.

But this is surely no easy matter either. Allowing yourself to become the mother, as it were, of the living Christ within the depths of your own soul is no easy matter, no simple transaction, as if somehow all you had to do was to fill ouL an application blank for eternal life, or pursue some other magical formula.

So when you affirm the life of Christ inside you, just as when you acknowledge of principalities and powers of death around you and within you, you can only do it with the deepest kind of fear and trembling. For, from an objective, horizontal point of view, we Christians take the most atrocious of risks: entrusting our lives to One who is invisible, and whose power is made known to us in weakness. So we naturally do it all with fear and trembling.

IV

But this is not the last word. It's not Paul's last word. Neither can it be my last word this morning.

For, arising in the midst of all this fear and trembling, like some sweet aroma of lilies that greets you Easter morn,-- arising all around us as we more and more feel free to internalize the cosmic drama of Christ as our own storyL a strange surprise can, and often does, overtake our lives: a sweetness far surpassing anything we ever thought might be possible in the valleys and the shadows of his life, with all our fear»and trembling.

I want to conclude now by just touching on this most elusive experience, tender but powerful, born of the fear and the trembling, yet perhaps its sweetest fruit: the experience of joy.

, Paul has shown the Philippians anew the cosmic drama of Christ, in a world hitherto dominated by death. lie has urged them to work out that salvation that Christ has wrought in their own lives, with fear and trembling.

Now, almost as if he never meant to give such prominence to fear and trembling in the first place, Paul points the Philippians to an experience that is both deeper and higher. He is writing from prison, where, apparently, he is facing the prospect of death everyday. He tells his Christian brothers and sisters, then, that should he be put to death, "offered up," he says, he will be glad and rejoice. Likewise, he says, they should be glad and rejoice with him.

Astounding as this sounds to those of us who are perhaps more at home with the fear and the trembling of the Christian life, than with its sweet joys, I think that this final glorious note of joy JLS existentially conceivable for you and for me, as it was for Paul.

I won't try to tell you how here. I only want to tell you a story.

This past week, as some of you know, I and my whole family have been under the weather, flat out^ with various viruses and other ills. In the course of such unplanned togetherness we leaned at times on various diversions, including that all-American sport of TV-watching.

In turning to one such program a couple of nights ago, my nine year old daughter and I happened to catch a glimpse of a filmed account of the birth of a baby, on educational television, which we then watched with rapt attention.

As these films go, I might say, this was one of the more realistic, and therefore one of the more beautiful birth stories I have yet seen on film.

As the mother pushed mightily, and as the new born began to emerge, these two onlookers were transfixed in wonder.

Just then the nine year old next to me spoke about the mother's face: "Look at her face! She looks so sad, but she's so happy!"

This is my prayer for you and for me this day: as we seek to internalize the cosmic drama of Christ's death and resurrection as our own story, and as we work out that salvation with fear and trembling, that that new birth of Christ in our lives might so deepen and heighten our fear and our trembling that we might taste the sweetness of joy.

"Therefore, my beloved... work out your own salvation with fear and trembling."

"Likewise, you should also be glad and rejoice with me." Amen.