

THE GRACE OF WRATH

Sermon, July 3, 2016

Text: Revelation 19:11-16

In the early days of the Civil War, the song "John Brown's Body" was wildly popular. It was at a flag-raising ceremony at Fort Warren (near Boston), on Sunday May 12, 1861, that it was publicly played for the first time. The tune was borrowed from an old Methodist hymn, "Say, Brothers, Will You Meet Us?" by William Steffe; who is believed to have taken it from an old Swedish tavern tune. A man by the name of George Kimball wrote how the Second Infantry Battalion of the Massachusetts militia, known as the "Tiger" Battalion, collectively worked out the lyrics to "John Brown's Body." He wrote: "We had a jovial Scotchman in the battalion, named John Brown. ...and as he happened to bear the identical name of the old hero of Harper's Ferry, he became at once the butt of his comrades. 'This can't be John Brown — why, John Brown is dead; his body lies mouldering in the grave.'"

(These weren't read in their entirety during the sermon, but the lyrics are as follows:)

John Brown's body lies a-mouldering in the grave; (3X) His soul's marching on!
(Chorus) Glory, glory, hallelujah! Glory, glory, hallelujah! Glory, glory, hallelujah! his soul's marching on!
He's gone to be a soldier in the army of the Lord! (3X) His soul's marching on! (Chorus)
John Brown's knapsack is strapped upon his back! (3X) His soul's marching on! (Chorus)
They will hang Jeff Davis on a sour apple tree! (3X) As they march along! (Chorus)
Now, three rousing cheers for the Union; (3X) As we are marching on!

In November 1861, Julia Ward Howe was touring Union army camps near Washington, D.C. with her husband (who was a member of President Lincoln's Military Sanitary Commission) and the Reverend James Freeman Clarke. During the course of their camp visit, the group began to sing "John Brown's Body." Pastor Clarke (not me, nor was he a relative) suggested that Mrs. Howe pen new lyrics to the familiar tune, and she replied that she had often thought of doing just exactly that. The following morning, as Mrs. Howe later described it, "I awoke in the gray of the morning twilight; and as I lay waiting for the dawn, the long lines of the desired poem began to twine themselves in my mind. Having thought out all the stanzas, I said to myself, 'I must get up and write these verses down, lest I fall asleep again and forget them.' So, with a sudden effort, I sprang out of bed, and found in the dimness an old stump of a pen ... I scrawled the verses almost without looking at the paper."

Her lyrics first appeared on the front page of *The Atlantic Monthly* in February of 1862 (a copy is in the bulletin insert this morning); editor James T. Fields, who paid her five dollars for the piece, is credited with having given the song the name by which it is known today, *The Battle Hymn of the Republic*. This was one of Winston Churchill's favorites; at his request it was played at his funeral in St. Paul's Cathedral in London in 1965. It was played at the state funerals of Presidents Eisenhower, Nixon and Reagan. The song was notably played on September 14, 2001 at the Washington National Cathedral and (again) at St. Paul's Cathedral during memorial services for the victims of the September 11 attacks. (Post-sermon update editor's note: a stirring rendition was recently performed July 12 at the Dallas memorial service for the five slain police officers). The lyrics of *The Battle Hymn* appeared often in Martin Luther King Jr.'s sermons and speeches, most notably in his final sermon "I've Been To The Mountaintop", delivered April 3, 1968, the night before his assassination. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s last public words were: "Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord."

Not everyone has been enamored with this song; many saw it as raw political propaganda thinly and self-righteously veiled in religious language, with too many applying the judgment of the "day of the Lord" to the destruction of the Southern armies by the North. Suffice it to say for now, there were many political, economic and less-than-altruistic reasons besides the noble cause of abolition that triggered this tragic war; there were many good, godly and principled people of integrity on both sides of the Mason-Dixon line, so it's understandable this song was not readily welcomed in the South and/or by those sympathetic to what they saw as the good and legitimate concerns in dispute. As best I can determine, the Presbyterian Church has never included *The Battle Hymn of the Republic* in any of her hymnals, largely due to this sympathetic (and wholly appropriate) sensitivity. With that said, however, Julia Ward Howe, who was steeped in the Calvinist tradition of her upbringing (but later became Unitarian), used biblical content and imagery throughout her poem that is in and of itself entirely appropriate for Christian worship; some of the imagery may be unfamiliar to the typical Christian today, but is nevertheless biblically sound and orthodox.¹

¹ For one rather strong example of dissent, which I obviously don't fully endorse, see the following ... this article also contains much of the song's history. <https://www.lewrockwell.com/2006/07/laurence-m-vance/blasphemy-in-song/>

For one example of such imagery, we have, "He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored." The grapes of wrath? What's that? That imagery is drawn from today's reading, Revelation 19:11-16, especially 15b: "He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty" (similar imagery is in Revelation 14:19-20). These verses have been interpreted by some as the victorious Christ riding forth to His last battle. However, the passage itself says nothing about a "last" battle. I agree with the interpretation these words describe not what Christ is *going* to do, but what He *is*: conquering King, righteous Judge, Captain of the armies of heaven. It will only be at the end of time that "every eye will see Him" as such; but at no time, not even on the cross, has He ever been anything other than that. Many scriptures encourage us to believe His heavenly army, which includes us, is being led out each and every day to fight evil, even should it cost our very lives, not just at some "last battle." (In the last line of the original hymn, it reads, "As he died to make men holy, let us die to make men free ..." Many hymnals have edited it to read a bit more softly "let us live to make men free." While that editing may be inspired by a good and wholesome exhortation, I think the original intent of the lyrics as written is that we really are called to follow our Lord's example and be faithful to what is good and true and right, even if it should cost our lives.)

A few summers ago, on the final day of Vacation Bible School, we took the VBS volunteer helpers to see the film "Evan Almighty," which was sort of a modern-day re-telling of the story of Noah's Ark. The movie was something of a sequel to the movie "Bruce Almighty," but far cleaner, wholesome and much more family-friendly; Morgan Freeman plays the part of God in both films. In "Evan Almighty," God/Morgan Freeman makes the assertion that people often miss the point of the story of Noah's Ark. He observes that people think it's a story about God's wrath, when it really is a "love story." Freeman/God goes on to make the statement: "Whatever I do, I do it out of love", which is an ongoing theme in this film. That got me to thinking: Is there any story about God that isn't a love story? Some may think the claim of the original Noah flood account being a love story underplays the problem of sin and the reality of God's wrath. But while "Evan Almighty" may over-simplify the account of the original Flood, I wholeheartedly agree with the premise that even what appears to us to be God's harshest wrath is always and wholly animated by His gracious love.

One of the first things we are taught in Sunday school is that God Is Love. And yes, we've also learned God is holy. The two are not necessarily contradictory, but some don't realize that. So many people view God as fundamentally angry. "Watch out for His wrath! God is love, sure, BUT God hates sin." Such thinking believes, "Oh, He may appear loving, kind and gentle ... but He really doesn't want you to enjoy yourself!"

How does one hold the two realities of God's love and God's wrath in tension? Well, think of God's wrath as God's love in action ... God's righteous and loving wrath is His emphatic "No!" to anything that leads to our destruction. That's a perspective which should resonate with any parent ... if your little child should step into oncoming traffic, you're going to scream "NO!" and yank that child out of harm's way. The child may perceive your reaction to be harsh, demanding, frightening, even unloving. But that child doesn't have your perspective. He/she can't see those things coming down the road which can do him/her great harm. What the child perceives as harsh and unloving is, in reality, an expression of your fiercest and purest love! And that's how it is with God. God's wrath is not a *counterpoint* to His love, but an *expression* of it. God hates sin not so much because it offends His sensibilities, He hates sin for the way it distorts our lives and hurts us. It's not "God is love, BUT God hates sin." It's "God is love, SO God hates sin." He is not out to get us. He is not fundamentally angry, or vindictive, or harsh, or a divine killjoy. He is fundamentally loving. He IS love. We are loved with a holy love that cries "No!" again and again to the things that will destroy us. Pardon the pun, but this is the GRACE OF WRATH. His wrath is His grace in action.

Now I know there are some pretty hard bits in Scripture. It is difficult to frame the destruction of the flood, or the saga of Sodom and Gomorrah, or death by crucifixion, as a love story. But if we truly believe God not only loves, but IS love, we will understand there is no action He can take that is not animated by love. Including the action we commemorate each and every time we observe the Lord's Supper. The journey to the cross was a mission of love, taken by the One who was the incarnation of love, and it is His fundamental nature to love.

"He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty." By the way ... that is an allusion to the crucifixion. There is so much that can be said about this imagery (we talked about this Maundy Thursday)², but just Who felt the full fury of the wrath of God? Who was crushed like a grape for our iniquities? The cup of the old covenant containing wine from the grapes of God's wrath has now been *transformed* into a cup of blessing. What is this cup of the new covenant? This cup we are about to drink is now filled with the blessing of God gained through the broken body and shed blood of Christ, because "He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty."

The Grace of Wrath. Whatever God does, He does it out of love. He does it because He loves us.

² See <https://greenwoodchurch.files.wordpress.com/2016/07/transformed-cup-2014.pdf>

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BATTLE HYMN OF THE REPUBLIC.

MINE eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord :
He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored ;
He hath loosed the fateful lightning of His terrible swift sword :
His truth is marching on.

I have seen Him in the watch-fires of a hundred circling camps ,
They have builded Him an altar in the evening dews and damps ;
I can read His righteous sentence by the dim and flaring lamps :
His day is marching on.

I have read a fiery gospel writ in burnished rows of steel :
“ As ye deal with my contemners, so with you my grace shall deal ;
Let the Hero, born of woman, crush the serpent with his heel,
Since God is marching on.”

He has sounded forth the trumpet that shall never call retreat ;
He is sifting out the hearts of men before His judgment-seat :
Oh, be swift, my soul, to answer Him ! be jubilant, my feet !
Our God is marching on.

In the beauty of the lilies Christ was born across the sea,
With a glory in his bosom that transfigures you and me :
As he died to make men holy, let us die to make men free,
While God is marching on.

Words by Julia Ward Howe.

Music by W. Steffe.

Allegretto.

1. Mine ... eyes have seen the glo - ry of the com - ing of the Lord; He is
2. I have seen Him in the watch-fires of a hun-dred cir-cling camps; They have
3. I have read a fie - ry gos - pel, writ in burn-ished rows of steel; “As ye
4. He has sound-ed forth the trum-pet that shall nev - er call re - treat; He is
5. In the beau - ty of the lil - ies Christ was born a - cross the sea. With a

tramp - ling out the vin - tage where the grapes of wrath are stored; He hath
build - ed Him an al - tar in the eve - ning dews and damps; I can
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he - ro, born of wo-man, crush the serpent with His heel, Since God is march - ing on.”
swift my soul to ans-wer Him! be ju - bi - lant, my feet! Our God is march - ing on.
died to make men ho - ly. let us die to make men free. While God is march - ing on.

CHORUS.

Glo - ry! Glo - ry! Hal - le - lu - jah! Glo - ry! Glo - ry! Hal - le - lu - jah!

Glo - ry! Glo - ry! Hal - le - lu - jah! His truth is march - ing on.