

SLD10.03.10
Emory Presbyterian Church
Revelation 21: 1-4
Matthew 18: 21-35 Matthew 5: 14-16
Jill Oglesby Evans

“Hardscrabble Hope”

Welcoming Words

A warm welcome to all who have gathered here this morning to worship God through word and song, through scripture and music, through sacred scripture and gospel blue grass.

We’re especially delighted to welcome back Tony Salazar and the Tucker Station String Band. For some years now, Tony has been our contact with the Southeastern Bluegrass Association, which jams in our Fellowship Hall on every 2nd Sunday afternoon, and has coordinated for us the delightful bands of that organization that provide the entertainment for our annual Bluegrass and Barbecue Festival, which was yesterday. This is the second time the Tucker Station Band has played for our worship on the Sunday following our Festival, and we thank you. Your music helps us tie together our festival and our faith.

Now this morning’s service is a celebration of a spirituality, a way of understanding and relating to God, that may differ from what some of us are accustomed to. One reason this may be is that Bluegrass Gospel music, at least Bluegrass *Mountain* Gospel music, is rooted in the pain and struggles of rural, Bible-believing, hard-scrabble folks who immigrated long ago deep into the hills of Southern Appalachia.¹ The ballads and hymnody of these Irish, Scottish, and English folk

¹ www.bluegrassgospel.ca/history.php

eventually blended with the rhythm and blues of the African slaves, who brought with them the design idea for the banjo, an instrument now integral to the bluegrass sound.²

And what might these two disparate groups have in common that their music should meld? Well, suffering, for one thing, and celebration, for another. And for both peoples, music wasn't so much performance as communal wail, communal praise, shared laughter, shared tears, music intended to capture and convey the toughness of their lives, the rawness of their hurts, the consolations of their faith. So listen for both the wail and wonder of the people of faith of the Appalachian mountains.

During this service we won't be standing and singing hymns the way we usually do (though you're encouraged to sing along any time, the words being provided in your bulletin insert and the red hymnal.) Today we'll stay seated most of the time and just listen, or hum, or sing, or sway, as, with the help of the Tucker Station String Band and our chancel choir, we glimpse hope and despair, sin and salvation, the way the people of Appalachia did, beginning with the confident sweet assurances of *Leaning On the Everlasting Arms*.

Leaning On the Everlasting Arms

Sally - Call to Confession

Sally - Prayer of Confession

Holy God, we come to you today confessing that we have not followed in the ways of your Son, Jesus Christ. We have seen people treated unjustly yet not offered to help. We have witnessed acts of violence but remained within our 'comfort zones.' Our hearts wander, our faith wavers, our actions belie our words. We rely on ourselves instead of trusting and leaning on you. Forgive us, Lord. Create in us a clean heart and a desire to follow your ways. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Cleansing Fountain - Choir

Sally - Assurance of Pardon

² www.bluegrass-museum.org/masters/history.

I Saw The Light

Jill - Passing the Peace of Christ

(Skip announcements?)

Joys and Concerns

Prayers of the People

The Word in Scripture and Song

As for many suffering peoples, the faith of Appalachian mountain folk sought to shift their attention from their present woes to the rewards of the next life, a heavenly life poetically described by the disciple John in his revelation on the isle of Patmos. In

Revelation 21: 1-4, John writes

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'See, the home of God is among mortals. God will dwell with them; they will be God's peoples, and God will be with them; God will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.'

Given the harshness of their lives, it was no wonder that mountain folk often dreamed, and sang, of one day flying away to a land where joy shall never end.

I'll Fly Away

Meanwhile, however, there was life on earth to contend with, and for the mountain folk, scripture was uncompromisingly clear about how one should behave. And one key to good gospel behavior was simply the practice of forgiveness, as described in

Matthew 18:21-22

Then Peter came and said to Jesus, 'Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?' Jesus said to him, 'Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.'

Only, in case you don't or can't or won't forgive? Well, in **verses 23-35**, Matthew tells the parable of the unforgiving servant:

Sally - '...the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything." And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow-slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, "Pay what you owe." Then his fellow-slave fell down and pleaded with him, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you." But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he should pay the debt. When his fellow-slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, "You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow-slave, as I had mercy on you?" And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he should pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.'

If You Don't Love Your Neighbor, Then You Don't Love God

Still, if you *do* love your neighbor and you *do* love God, or, at least, try to, and behave accordingly, why, then, you will become, as Matthew says in 5:14-16,

"...the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven."

And your light shining before others will reveal a beautiful life that looks like this:

A Beautiful Life

However simple or sophisticated our theology today, however nuanced or layered or politically correct, some truths seem always to ring clear. Love God, love your neighbor, love yourself. Do justice, love kindness, and turn from sin and its power in the world. And, to whatever extent you are able, “make flowers bloom along the way.”

To the glory of God. Amen.

Call to Offering

Because we in this church know that everything we have belongs to God, one way we make flowers bloom along the way is by sharing what we have. I invite you now to bring your tithes and offerings before God.

Angel Band – Choir

Doxology

Prayer of Thanksgiving

When the Angels Sing

Charge and Benediction

Hymn 67 in red hymnal ***How Firm a Foundation***

