

Kirby Lawrence Hill

Abington Presbyterian Church

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Isaiah 9:2-7

Titus 2:11-15

A VIBRANT FAITH: ZELOS

A vibrant faith - we are exploring how we might get what we as people of faith urgently need for these extraordinary times. This four-part sermon series began last week with a look at the gift of God's 'logos.' That is the Greek noun for word. We certainly need God's inspiring guidance that comes through God's word heard through scripture so we can live out that life-giving word in our own context. With the New Testament originally having been written in Greek, the noun we focus on today is the word 'zelos.' The English word, zeal, has its origin in that Greek word. It means great energy or enthusiasm in pursuit of a cause or an objective.

We are Presbyterians. We are not normally known for our zealous enthusiasm. Rationality? Yes. Deliberative decision-making? Yes. Zeal? Maybe not so much. Also, we are living in a challenging time when there are understandable reasons for being lacking in zeal. Many more than usual have suffered the death of loved ones in recent months. Many have lost jobs or have had education or travel or vocational plans that have been put on hold or seriously altered. The loss of our pre-Covid pattern of social contacts or the loss of time with extended family may have us feeling down or even depressed and disempowered. Things that could be accomplished quite simply in the past have become much more difficult to work on these days. The impact of the pandemic has lasted longer than many of us expected, and it is not clear how long the current challenges will continue. It becomes a bit hard to see a reason for enthusiastic zeal.

Into such a situation, as we talked about last week, comes God's logos. Our first scripture reading for today is one we normally hear only at Christmastime, but as we talked about God's logos that comes to us in human form, we look afresh at this passage. This wonderful poetic chapter from Isaiah is the source for two pieces from Handel's great musical work, The Messiah. The beginning of this Isaiah

passage, Handel expresses through a bass solo: “The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light; and they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined.” The words speak of hope, but the music frankly is a little gruff in my estimation. But then, in the very next piece, we hear a joyful lightness in the orchestra and choir in the chorus that declares: “For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given, and the government shall be upon his shoulder.” And then it gets musically bolder: “and his name shall be called wonderful counselor, the mighty God, the everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.”¹ Do you know the musical pieces? Do you now have that uplifting music in your minds?

But Handel’s Messiah doesn’t contain the next verse in our reading, that tells us that the person God was sending would establish endless peace, upholding it with justice and with righteousness forevermore. Neither does it include the last line which is: “The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.” Have you ever thought about God being zealous? In Hebrew, it is the word, qinah. The passage seems to indicate that it is out of zeal that God is taking action to shine light upon those who have been in darkness, to actually be born unto those people so they might experience in their midst a wonderful counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace. What causes God to have the zeal that leads to such actions?

God is One who recognizes the great needs we as humanity have. That recognition of great need is combined with a great love for those in need. That’s where God’s zeal comes from. Our passage from the Apostle Paul’s Epistle to Titus indicates that it is Jesus Christ at work within us that can form us into those who are zealous to carry out good deeds, building in us a compassion that can see the needs of others around us along with inspiring us in loving ways to respond to those needs.

Paul, in another of his letters, described himself to have had a different kind of zeal before his conversion to Christianity, when he was zealous to persecute the early church. He actually was more like a zealot at that time, which is a person who is fanatical, uncompromising in pursuit of religious or political ideals. Untethered zeal actually can be destructive.

When I was in college, during the summers I worked as a painter's helper in oil refineries and chemical plants in and around Houston, where I was living at the time. Part of my work was to sand blast metal items, getting any old paint off them in preparation for a new coat of paint. If you have not seen one, a sand blasting unit works under high air pressure to send a powerful stream of sand through a hose and nozzle to do its job. Sand blasters wear protective equipment and have to hold on tightly to the hose and nozzle in use, because the sand, under such high pressure, can cut through a person's skin if it hits you. There is what is called a dead man's lever on the nozzle, so if someone were to faint or lose control of the nozzle while sand blasting, the system would automatically shut down. Against safety regulations, I heard of folks who would use a big rubber band to hold the dead man switch down, as it was a little bit tiresome to constantly hold it down by hand. I remember hearing about someone who lost control of the hose and the sand blaster did not shut down. The hose was dancing all around, shooting cutting sand this way and that. It sent everyone running to get away from it until it could be shut down from a distance. Zeal needs direction, or it can actually cause hurts, instead of heal them.

A Presbyterian pastor and author wrote about how to discern such needed direction for zeal from God. He indicates that it is difficult to hear God's guiding word or voice coming to us in a cacophony of voices. Amidst the noise, Frederick Buechner offers this advice: "the kind of work God usually calls you to is the kind of work (a) that you need most to do and (b) that the world most needs to have done. ... The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." ²

Different people have varying kinds of efforts that lead to a deep gladness for them. When Handel wrote his huge orchestral and choral composition, The Messiah, he did all that composing in just three or four weeks this time of year in 1741. ³ I dare say he was writing with quite a zeal. I was visiting recently with someone who has a terminal illness. Since this person was diagnosed, he has worked diligently, zealously, to put out a number of publications so his knowledge in his area of expertise could be shared with others before he is no

longer able to do so. It has given him purpose during difficult days and it has benefited others significantly.

There are plenty of different needs around us that are calling for attention these days. Joyfully, God places in differing ones of us varying activities for which we might have zeal. I am thankful for those people who enthusiastically organize so that families who are without food, might still get fed. There are others who get engaged with our care team, who find ways to express care and concern for those who are isolated or suffering from grief. I give thanks for those who relish being a youth advisor or who find ways to carry out our education ministry even under challenging circumstances. What a joy it is that we have those who share their musical gifts in ways that enrich us all. We delight in people who work for peace, upheld in what is just and right. There are many avenues through which we can live with a nurturing or healing zealous that can offer a vibrancy to faith.

Our loving God is not indifferent to human need. Among God's great gifts to us are passions that can be used in ways to address the needs of others. When a pandemic makes it difficult to find ways to live out our nurturing or healing passions, then the gift of zeal, coming from our wonderful counselor, mighty God, everlasting Father and Prince of Peace can energize us to find new ways to live out what is needed in this time. Divinely inspired zealous can direct our deep gladness to the world's deep hunger in new and creative ways. As Isaiah tells us: "the zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this!" That's reason for a hallelujah chorus!

¹ <http://gfhandel.org/handel/messiahlibretto.html>

² Frederick Buechner, Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC, Harper and Row, 1973

³ <https://www.bsomusic.org/stories/5-things-you-might-not-know-about-handels-messiah/#:~:text=It%20was%20written%20incredibly%20fast,24%20days%20writing%20the%20oratorio.>