

No End

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Hebrews 1:1-4, 2:5-12

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We are our most capable of sin, most capable of evil, when we are at our best. So says Reinhold Niebuhr. We are most capable of self-destruction and most likely to do some serious evil, not when we are weak or in distress or at our worst, but when we are at our best. In the moment after the home run and the victory; not after the strikeout and the defeat are we our most dangerous to ourselves and to others. That is an interesting observation, which may or may not be true, but what I think is most worrisome about Niebuhr's observation are the reverse implications. It means that the fullness of our faith, hope, and love may not be on display when we are a resounding success, when we are living the dream, and when we are on top of the world, rather the best of faith, hope, and love often shine through when we have been left for dead, counted out, forgotten, overlooked, and dismissed.

We tend to look back to the days of early Christianity with a loop of Bruce Springsteen's *Glory Days* playing in the background. Jesus was freshly on the scene. Paul was starting new churches everywhere. Sure, the Corinthians were a little screwed up and the Galatians a bit legalistic, but wasn't faith just better, easier, clearer, and more attractive back in the glory days? Or maybe the glory days were the post-World War II era of American Protestantism that now seem to be running on fumes. Or maybe it was the founding of our country when everybody loved their 'mama, loved Jesus, and America, too.'¹ One of the startling things to me as I sometimes look backwards wistfully are the actual facts—as John Adams reminds us, facts are stubborn things. Take for example the glory days of the Reformation era when religious fervor was exploding across Europe like a white-hot inferno whether it was Martin Luther nailing his theses to the Wittenburg church doors or various heretics on the wrong side of the powers that be getting burned at the stake. In Grant Wacker, Randall Balmer, and Jon Butler's history of *Religion in American Life* though, they remind us that in 1572 (what one might have thought was the height of Reformation era), a minister in Hertfordshire, England, 'complained that on Sunday 'a man may find the churches empty, saving the minter and two or four lame, and old folke; for the rest are gone to follow the devil's daunce' (on Saturday night).²

Well, what about the glory days of American history when the Declaration of Independence was penned, the days before the unpleasantness between North and

¹ From Tom Petty, 'Free Fallin' from *Full Moon Fever*, 1989.

² Jon Butler, Grant Wacker, Randall Balmer, from *Religion in American Life*, 9

South, the days when everybody loved George Washington so much they wanted to make him King. According to this history of Religion in America, in 1776 ‘probably no more than 20 percent of America’s adults were members of a church, and about 1/3 of the country’s white adults belonged to a Christian congregation. Adult whites who were church members ranged from 10 percent in Vermont, the lowest, to about 20 percent, the average.’ In contrast, in roughly 2020, 43% of Americans are some kind of Protestant and 20% of Americans are Roman Catholic, roughly 2-3 times the number at the time of the American Revolution. Ambiguous Days just doesn’t have the same ring to it as Glory Days does though.

Today’s scripture is from another era of glory days: the first century church. The letter to the Hebrews was most likely an extended sermon preached by someone in the early church urging and encouraging those fledgling churches to be confident in Christ’s life and work in the world, and to live faithful, hopeful, and loving lives, even in the face of persecution and the challenges of the moment.³ Christ, the preacher of Hebrews reminds them and us, is the [human] reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word’ (v.3). This one-verse statement—reflection of God’s glory and imprint of God’s being--might be the best theological description we have in scripture of who Jesus Christ is and why it matters for us; and it doesn’t come from a massive well-oiled powerful organization but from these fledgling fringe communities trying to make sense of their lives in light of Jesus Christ. For them, comfort and stability were not the glory days, the glory days were learning that they were worthy of redemption and might be to shape the world more deeply into a reflection of God’s glory. These beautiful courageous and confident words and this vision of reality came from a community that was barely a blip on Rome’s radar. Sometimes we are our best when we don’t look very formidable at all. Sometimes we are at our best when we think our tank is empty. Sometimes we are at our best in the worst of times not the best of times.

Perhaps one of the strongest witnesses of the church’s life in the twentieth century occurred as it became the only institution left in Germany society in the 1930s that dared oppose Hitler’s syntheses of God and country, ‘gospel and patriotism, Christian hope and national destiny,’ into a distorted ideology. Historical theologian Edward Dowey reminds us that this ‘distortion of cross into swastika, which seemed obvious to wise [people] from afar, (and maybe even more obvious to us as we look back, ‘was clear in Germany to relatively few.’ Among those few were some courageous and confident Protestant church leaders who made a stand and confessed their faith in opposition to Hitler’s blended church of national pride and racial superiority. This attempt to stand up to Hitler in service to Jesus Christ caused Albert Einstein to say: ‘Only the church stood

³ Harold Attridge, ‘Introduction to Hebrews,’ Harper Collins Study Bible, p.2250.

squarely across the path of Hitler's campaign for suppressing the truth...I am forced to confess that what I once despised, I now praise unreservedly.'⁴

Nearly all of the New Testament comes to us from times of crisis and cultural upheaval. It was not produced in a neat and tidy form by a bunch of scribes writing everything down up in some hidden cabal like a Dan Brown novel...instead we have scraps of Paul's letters that held the Corinthian church together, we have gospels that captured Jesus' life and teachings and passion for future generations, we have accounts of struggles and challenges and deep crisis in various congregations scattered across the known world trying to serve this crucified and risen Jewish Rabbi they believed was Lord of the Universe and Savior of the world. Nothing is nailed down. Nothing is certain. Nothing seems very stable.

What is striking about this letter to the Hebrews is how confident it sounds in the face of the brutality of life in the first century, how confident it sounds that Christ's suffering redeems humanity and brings us all before God as Christ's own brothers and sisters, even though their host society thought such a vision of reality was delusional. In spite of it all, the letter to the Hebrews exudes a bold confidence that true reality, Christ's kingdom if you will, is not found in the kill or be killed world of every one looking out for his and herself, but in the world where people sacrifice for each other, where they love the people God has put in their path that day, where they live their lives as if Christ's kingdom has no end.

Today our affirmation of faith is not the Apostles' Creed but probably the less familiar and more wordy Nicene Creed...A lot of the extra words are used to remind the early church that Christ the Son is equally divine with God the Father and not a subordinate deity, but I think the boldest line of the whole Nicene Creed is found in the last sentence of the second section, that Christ's kingdom will have no end. That affirmation was made in 325 A.D. before the fall of Rome and the collapse civilization as it was known then. That affirmation was made before the first millennium and the discovery of the New World. That affirmation was made before the founding of this country and centuries of empires and world wars. All these events and people have come and gone, but that affirmation remains as bold and confident and true as ever. Christ's kingdom will have no end. Think about that. In 1990, no one would have believed Blockbuster video would have any end. As late as the year 2016, I read a book that lamented the threat that the shopping mall posed to the church. It feared the church could not compete with this rival vision of the good life and consumerist kingdom.⁵ But Blockbuster video, except for one remaining store in Bend, Oregon, has come and gone. The shopping mall, thanks to

⁴ Edward Dowey, 'Introduction to the 'Book of Confessions,' 252.

⁵ James KA Smith, *You Are What You Love*, 45-46.

Amazon, is more often a challenge to try and keep open. But in spite of massive changes in society and commerce, even in just the last ten years, Christ's kingdom has no end.

If I had one wish I could grant to me and to you as we seek to be the Christian community of today and tomorrow, it would be the gift of confidence. Not conceit or superiority or self-importance. But confidence like we find in the letter to the Hebrews.

Confidence that Christ's kingdom has no end, even when our lives seem like a hot mess and the world seems to be pulling apart at the seams.

Confidence that Christ's kingdom has no end even when we rarely see instant measurable results.

Confidence that Christ's kingdom can transform this world and make us truly human, no matter our skepticism or disbelief.

Confidence....confidence that Christ's kingdom never ends. Ever.