

Exhortations for Today's Reformation Church:

[Revelation 14:6-8](#)

Bach Cantata Vespers + Sunday, October 28, 2018

Grace Lutheran Church, River Forest, IL

[Rev. Nancy M. Raabe](#), [Holy Trinity Lutheran Church](#), Marshall, WI

Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come.

What does the church need? That was the challenge Mark Bangert set for himself as plenary speaker at a composers' colloquium here in Chicago six years ago.

Mark began his talk by confessing that when he finally sat down to write it, at first he had a hard time figuring out what to say. But somewhere during the third martini of the night, he told us, it came to him. What the church doesn't need, Mark said, are more psalm settings, or liturgical settings, or formulaic anthems or concertatos. What the church needs is exhortation. Exhortation such as one finds in Bach's cantatas. For poets to write in daring, exhortative language. To lay out texts that say, "This is what Jesus says. Now, how are you going to respond?" More exhortation, less storytelling, and the music to accompany it.

Exhortation: We have Isaiah. We have Shakespeare. But I wonder whether Revelation might be the most soaring exhortation known to humankind. John's vision is beyond history, beyond time. It challenges the church of every age to wake up to the destructive power of idolatry unleashed.

Revelation calls on the faithful to remain vigilant in their hope in Christ. But its main purpose is to exhort unbelievers to recognize the magnitude of the spiritual

danger they are facing, because the ultimate object of their idol worship *has* been defeated. The captivity of the world is Revelation's main concern, and it is where today's verses direct our attention. As we move into the next half-millennium of the Reformation, there can be no timelier word.

In exile on the island of Patmos, John wrote what he saw, as the Son of Man commanded him, around 95 AD during the reign of the Roman emperor Domitian. John addressed his letter to the seven churches of Asia in what is now western Turkey. Roman law required that all subjects worship the emperor as a god, and Domitian took this to extremes. Highly skilled in his use of propaganda, Domitian erected a cult of personality around himself that allowed him to shape public and private opinion to his advantage. (Sound familiar?) The temple of Domitian at Ephesus said it all—a massive podium supported by 35-foot-high columns, each column covered in carvings of various deities. The message was that the entirety of the world's gods supported Domitian as ultimate lord of heaven and earth.

Christians, of course, refused to participate in this cultic emperor worship. Those identified as Christian leaders were increasingly being brought before Roman officials and given three choices: Apostatize, compromise, or face exile or execution. The persecution of Christians under Domitian was spreading to Asia, so no wonder the seven churches to whom John addressed his letter were in distress.

The act of exhortation commands two things of those on the receiving end: that they acknowledge the reality of their current situation, and that they commit to some form of action as a response.

Historically, John's letter can be heard as a blistering critique of Rome and its ungodly culture, and as an exhortation to the churches to remain steadfast in Christ. "Wake up! Repent!" John urges them in first three chapters.

But from Chapter 4 on we are caught up beyond time in the cosmic theater of spiritual warfare. The battle is being waged for not for the souls of the righteous, who have already been sanctified, but for the souls of the unbelievers.

In today's verses from chapter 14 we arrive at a decisive moment in that battle that bears implications for our response to John's exhortation. Let's glance at how we got here. In Chapter 12, war breaks out in heaven. The archangel Michael wins a great victory, and Satan is thrown down to earth. In Chapter 13 we find him rising out of the sea as a monstrous beast. The entire spectrum of nonbelievers is amazed because the beast's mortal wound has miraculously healed. Enthralled, people begin to follow and then to worship the beast, reasoning, "Who can fight against it?"

At the end of Chapter 13 the scene is one of spiritual bankruptcy. Just then, at the beginning of Chapter 14, John is shown a dazzling vision of the Lamb on Mount Zion, surrounded by multitudes of the sanctified...and music! – a voice like the sound of many harps, singing the new song of the redeemed.

John then sees two angels in flight, loudly announcing a gospel, not of grace but of judgment. Fear God or meet your doom, because the fate of the deceiver, the seducer, the god-pretender—Babylon, Rome—has already been sealed. Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great! Other angels elaborate a few chapters later: “Come out of her, my people, so you do not take part in her sins.”

It’s important to know that *we* are not the unbelievers. Sinners, yes, who find new ways to stumble and fall on a daily basis. But in our baptism we have been joined with Christ in his death and resurrection. We know the end of the story, as Walt Bouman loved to say, and we have staked our claim there as participants in Christ’s rule.

To what, then, are we being exhorted by these two angels—we the redeemed?

To more than keeping the faith. To more than praying. To more than going to church. To more than gritting our teeth and thinking, “This too shall pass.” And certainly to more than being argumentative.

First, we are exhorted to call the thing what it is—one of Martin Luther’s prerequisites for being a theologian of the cross. Are we able to see how things really are? That the entire earthly order has drunk the wine of Babylon’s idolatry? Paul warns us in our verses from 2nd Thessalonians 3 that the going will get rougher: Satan will fight until all resistance has been exhausted. Only then will he suffer final defeat.

Second, today’s verses are exhorting us to enter into the world’s captivity through the crucified Christ. To find God hidden in the midst of the world’s tribulation,

and God knows every day seems to bring new troubles. And to discern what that means for how we live our lives.

Fallen, fallen: It has become clichéd to say that basic structures that have defined our lives are being shaken. Truth as the gauge of reality has fallen out of favor, while those trafficking in falsehoods are glorified. The civility of human communication is in shambles. Our treasured Lutheran heritage of congregational song is being dismissed in our own churches as obscure (although, thanks be to God, not in this one). Houses of worship are no longer safe places for peace and healing, but objects of acts of terror.

What are we to do? Apostatize and say, “All is lost”? Compromise and say, “We might just as well go along with it—who can fight against it?” Or boldly to enter into the world’s captivity, as today’s verses are exhorting us to do? To be present in the world with the suffering Christ and exercise there the gifts of proclamation, perseverance, and persuasion God has given us?

Teresa of Avila:

*Christ has no body now on earth but yours,
no hands but yours, no feet but yours,
yours are the eyes with which his compassion looks upon the world,
yours are the hands with which he blesses all the world.*

And Martin Luther:

*Now when I have given God honor,
then whatever life I live, I live for my neighbor,
to serve and help him.*

As people of the resurrection, we are called to facilitate God's work of redemption for the sake of our Lord and Savior, who cannot bear that even one would be lost. Can we empty ourselves of pride and arrogance? Can we take heed of those who have not yet heard the angel's call to fear God, instead of judging and dismissing them? Can we speak up for truth, without putting others down? Can we proclaim without a partisan agenda? Can we learn to listen? Can we learn to love? And as those who have no reason to expect forgiveness but keep receiving it anyway, can we learn to forgive?

The cantata we are about to hear sweeps us up into this cosmic movement. Bach's electrifying opening chorus gives dimension in sound to unswerving faith in the great victory won by God in Christ. Imagine this accompanying that very battle! The chorale then exhorts us to thank God for God's gifts and grace. And the bass recitative calls for God's mercy upon the many who "yet at this time must labor under a foreign yoke out of blindness."

Are we capable ourselves of this mercy? Do we have the will and the courage to exercise it on behalf of the risen Christ? Pray that we do, for the world awaits our response.

Amen.