

Overwhelmed

Ephesians 5: 15-20; Revelation 5: 1-14

Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost, (Oct. 17) 2021

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Save me, O God

For the waters have come up to my neck.

I sink in deep mire,

Where there is no foothold.

I have come into deep waters,

And the flood sweeps over me.

- Psalm 69:1-2

In his 1978 novel, *The World According to Garp*, John Irving writes about the Garp family who went to the beach in New Hampshire every summer. One of the Garp kids was Walt. Going out to the beach the family members would warn Walt when he was little, and then again and again over the next few years, “Watch out for the undertow.” Irving writes they would say,

‘The undertow is bad today.’

‘The undertow is strong today.’

‘The undertow is wicked today.’ Wicked was a big word in New Hampshire – not just for the undertow.

And for years Walt [watched] out for it. From the first, when he asked what it could do to you, he had only been told that it could pull you out to sea. It could suck you under and drown you and drag you away.

It was Walt’s fourth summer [on the beach and the family] remembered...

Walt watching the sea. He stood ankle-deep in the foam from the surf and peered into the waves, without taking a step, for the longest time. The family went down to the water's edge to have a word with him.

'What are you doing, Walt?' Helen asked.

'What are you looking for, dummy?' Duncan asked him.

'I'm trying to see the Under Toad,' Walt said.

'The what?' said Garp.

'The Under Toad,' Walt said. 'I'm trying to see it. How big is it?'

And Garp and Helen and Duncan held their breath; they realized that all these years Walt had been dreading a giant toad, lurking offshore, waiting to suck him under and drag him out to sea. The terrible Under Toad.

Most of us understand young Walt's concern. The terrible Under Toad wants to grab us and suck us under and drag us out to sea. These days we're living in a time with lots of Under Toads and they just keep on a coming.

The Under Toad got a hold of Susan Rushing a long time ago, and I tell this story with her permission. Susan was 17 and an exchange student in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. She went swimming and was a strong and accomplished swimmer. There were yellow warning flags out, but you know how it is, she's 17 and a strong swimmer, so out she goes, until the Under Toad grabbed her – rather she became caught in the powerful undertow. She recalls being dragged out further and further and there was nothing she could do. She fought it, tried to outswim it, struggled against it... the waves kept coming and overwhelmed her, the turbulent water roiled and churned pulling her down. Finally, she simply let go and went with it, hoping the powerful undercurrent would eventually release her, but instead it

pulled her down and further out.

Susan was caught in a powerful current. What novelist John Irving called the Under Toad, and what Cambridge theologian David Ford calls “being overwhelmed.” The Psalmist said it well:

*Save me, O God
For the waters have come up to my neck.
I sink in deep mire,
Where there is no foothold.
I have come into deep waters,
And the flood sweeps over me. (Ps. 69:1-2).*

We are overwhelmed when the waves keep on coming and the current pulls us down, we are washed over, covered over completely, as if a storm surge hits us, and even washes us away. Ford says not only do we have those overwhelming experiences but that we live in the middle of “overwhelmedness.” It defines the world we’re living in – our personal lives, our social lives, our political lives, and the life of the wider world (see *The Shape of Living: Spiritual Directions for Everyday Life*, p. 13ff).

I know many of you are abstaining from watching the news and staying off social media because of so much news of despair and disaster hitting all the time, day after day. We are inundated by it; we are overwhelmed.

We live in a world of rising seas and sinking possibilities, where the

multiple crises of sustainability, justice, pandemics, destruction of the climate and the dehumanization of people overwhelm us all. Our jobs are precarious, working conditions are deteriorating, and our work loads are mounting.

For me personally, I've felt the Under Toad trying to get me with my cancer diagnosis and heading for surgery this week. I've been surprised by the level of my own anxiety. Of course, part of the challenge is that as the anxiety grows, our sense of being overwhelmed increases, our vision narrows until all we can see is what is immediately in front of us. It seems as if for the last 18 months, if not for the last 5 years, all we've done is try to survive and cope and get by.

In the face of overwhelmingness, our Scripture readings this morning are about singing. Paul wrote to the small, struggling church in Ephesus, who was trying to figure out how to live the Christ-like life over the long haul. Paul tells them, and tells us, to sing so that we will be joined together or harmonized together into the people of God.

Paul mentioning being harmonized into the people of God is no small thing. The White Right Wing these days frequently uses "replacement" language. They say that Haitian immigrants, immigrants from Central America, refugees, are going to replace Whites and take White people's jobs. Black and Latinx voters are going to replace White voters and so on. Notice the language used is spatial language and the thinking is spatial. Theologian Jeremy Begbie says spatial thinking often presupposes competition, juxtaposition, and mutual exclusion. The assumption is that two objects cannot occupy the same space at the same time. Spatial language says we must keep others out or they will take our place. Begbie suggests that we

think in auditory ways, think in terms of sound and music. For example, when two or more musical notes are played at exactly the same time, they enter into each other, combine, all the while still being heard as distinct notes. They make harmony. There is no diminishment, no degradation, no competition, and no replacement. Instead, there is enhancement (see Norman Wirzba, *This Sacred Life: Humanity's Place in a Wounded World*, p. 184).

Perhaps Paul is telling the church in Ephesus, made of up of all kinds of people, that as new and different people come into the church, no one is replaced, no one is in competition with another. Instead, we are being harmonized into a new people of God in Christ. Something new is happening. Each person still is distinct, but together God is doing something incredibly new and exciting. No diminishment or replacement, but enhancement. So, when we sing together, the Holy Spirit is at work doing some amazing things with us together – which is reason all the more reason to sing!

And we read from Revelation. Revelation, the last book of the Bible, arises out of a troubled church. Although the writer does not tell us directly the troubles these young, fledgling congregations faced, we know a lot from reading between the lines. Here was a church clinging for its life in the midst of the Roman Empire. Small bands of Christians surrounded by an oppressive empire which is persecuting them, and a pagan world which is pressuring them to conform. What are they to do? They are called to go throughout the world preaching the good news of Jesus Christ, but the truth is that they are barely making it. Where is their hope in such overwhelming circumstances?

Strangely enough, this book does not begin with despair. Revelation begins with great shouts of praise! After all, the church is in trouble, the empire is stepping up the persecutions of Christians. Why are they singing?

Even though it was written during one of the greatest persecutions the church would ever have to face, Revelation is noted for its sustained outbursts of exuberant joy and praise. This vision of John's does not begin in despair, but in doxology, in praise. Throughout the entire book, there is praise and the singing of hymns. John, who should have been overwhelmed by the great sea of troubles that faced him and his beloved churches, responds by an overwhelming affirmation of the grace and triumph of God in Jesus Christ – the One who conquers by being slain like a lamb. Revelation is filled with poetry and hymn that evokes images of invasion, of cosmic battles, then of decisive victory by the Almighty God through the Cross.

John on the island of Patmos responded to the overwhelmingness of Evil and Death with affirmation of the overwhelmingness of the victory of the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ.

Today sweeping claims are being made. What happens in Jesus Christ is not simply something that is private and individual, as we often twist the Christian faith. Being a Christian is not about asking Jesus into your heart. It is about losing ourselves in Christ. It is about joining the Kingdom of God known in Jesus Christ – this is public, this is cosmic, and it is political. The politics of Jesus. Matters of vast importance are being addressed. Seemingly intractable problems are being defeated. There is no corner of creation that is immune from this sweeping influx

of grace.

Theologian David Ford says that mid-18th century England was overwhelmed with social problems. The gin trade had led to huge problems with alcoholism. The industrial revolution was laying waste to the English countryside, resulting in vast numbers of people seeking employment in the cities. Child labor was the scourge of the land. There was social dislocation and chaos. Things seemed overwhelming.

It was in this world that John and Charles Wesley began their ministry. They countered these problems not necessarily with a new social program for human betterment, but rather with a revival which, in Ford's words, "responded to the problems of the day with an overwhelming affirmation of Divine grace." They responded to the problems with singing of hymns. As a matter of fact, the Methodist revival in England spread into organizing labor unions, political activism that changed laws, fed people, clothed people, and changed England. And it all began with singing hymns.

So, what good do hymns do?

Hymns respond to the overwhelmingness of Evil, with the overwhelmingness of the Resurrected Life, the overwhelmingness of Death, with an affirmation of the power of God. And that is the place to begin. Hear me clearly, I am not saying that singing solves all our problems. But I am saying that we must begin somewhere. When we are overwhelmed; we are paralyzed; we are demoralized. We despair of making a difference and we have no confidence that a

difference can be made. We are worn down, exhausted, and lose hope. When we are overwhelmed, we have to have someplace to stand, some great foundation from which we can affirm the truth about where we are. When what has seemed firm gives way beneath us, we go back to the deepest foundations, the deepest rock of salvation and hope.

That is why Revelation has this great shout of joy, this great exuberant, confident affirmation of the power of God.

Back to Susan Rushing. Susan's testimony is that she went down into the deep and let go. Perhaps she lost consciousness, who knows. What she does know is that suddenly she entered extraordinary light that was filled with mercy and joy and love. She was not alone because she saw people everywhere and there was warmth. It was the most joy-filled exuberant feeling she has ever experienced. Then suddenly she was yanked by her hair back into this world, and to a certain extent, into disappointment. Susan says that experience was a hinge-moment in her life. She's never forgotten it and never gotten over it. As she walked home that day, she walked beneath blessed arms of the Christ the Redeemer statue in Rio and had the profound sense that Christ was with her, watching over her, and changing her life.

Sometimes "deep calleth unto deep" as the Psalmist says. Overwhelming darkness and despair can only be countered by overwhelming light and joy.

So, we need to sing. If we want to face down Evil, and have the courage to take on guns, racism, poverty, pandemics, and destruction of the planet then we

must sing with power and joy of the grace and triumph of God.

Sunday after Sunday you have come here, and despite my best efforts at preaching, despite a clear reading of God's word in Scripture, what really moves you, what really fills you with power to keep on going is the music and singing. Sometimes it is when we join our voices together in the way that we know how, and sing to God a great hymn of praise, you know that God will see you through. Or it is when Miki stands in our midst and sings from her soul, and then we know that Jesus Christ reigns, that Death will be defeated and that Life and goodness, love, mercy, and grace will ultimately have the last word, and though the future looks overwhelming, we will make it together in Christ.

I think that is why we come here Sunday after Sunday. We are looking for the strength to go on in the face of being overwhelmed. And the only way to counter the overwhelmingness of Death is to affirm the overwhelmingness of the resurrection and the grace of God.

And that is why we sing.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God,
Mother of us all. Amen.