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## A Doxological Interruption

Revelation 1:4-8

A sermon preached at Page Auditorium on November 22, 2015

by Mr. Joshua Lazard

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*Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.*

**To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.**

*Look! He is coming with the clouds;*

*every eye will see him,*

*even those who pierced him;*

*and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail. So it is to be, Amen.*

*“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.*

There are many forms of isolation that span the breadth of the human experience. For many of us, we encounter isolation at an early age on the playground in the schools that we attend as youth. We know how isolation and that feeling of aloneness can be when perhaps you were the last picked for a kickball team or the last chosen for a game. Such an encounter with isolation complicates itself in the teenage years as one has to navigate the pitfalls of adolescence. Being part of the “in”-crowd or hanging with the cool kids, striking out on one’s own and being comfortable with one’s self can cause moments of isolation here and there.

The cold hard reality of isolation, especially the part that’s not so pleasant, often occurs through the emotion of abandonment. These emotions are not always fleeting, but can seem to become a part of your being; knowing just exactly what it means when someone leaves you—and there’s nothing you can do about it. The death of a parent can certainly be a blow to the personal spirit that forces a lot of questions toward God; it can involve raging against the heavens demanding an answer. Whether an answer comes or not, there can be a moment of sheer isolation that can find itself creeping into your personal space.

Recognizing that isolation isn’t just a physical state of being, many also know isolation to be a real psychological mindset. On the one hand, one’s body can be forced into isolation by an outside force, or the times an individual of their own volition can self-isolate themselves. That self-isolation often times comes in a form of someone escaping for a vacation or simply going out for a walk to clear their head. However, psychological isolation is something over which the individual usually has sole control. In the cult classic movie “The Shawshank Redemption” the protagonist named Andy, is in jail for a crime that the viewer is never quite sure if her committed or not. He is befriended by Morgan Freeman’s character simply known as the color Red. Andy, who works for

the warden, receives a donation for the prison library and it includes the LP recording of *The Marriage of Figaro*, and Andy plays it over the prison loudspeaker and it lands him in solitary confinement. When Andy gets out of solitary confinement, Red asks him how did he survive, and Andy says that the song played over the loudspeaker played in his head over and over again—and he was able to escape in his head. Andy's body was not just imprisoned from larger society, but his body was also placed in solitary confinement even further isolated from people; he was isolated from the rest of humanity and imprisoned by outside forces—but his mind on the other hand, his mind was able to find liberation in the midst of isolation.

The story of the Christianity was based on a man who lived and walked the streets of Jerusalem and walked with a band of men and women whom we call his disciples back and forth across the Transjordan region on the eastern edge of what we now call the Mediterranean Sea. The Christian tradition was based on this man, this man named Jesus, walking up Golgotha's hill—isolated from him people who had called for his death and even from his disciples who were no where to be found—this man named Jesus traveled up Calvary's hill, based on trumped up charges and facing the death of crucifixion usually saved for political prisoners or at least those who were convicted of a crime in which the state government wanted to make an example of. This Jesus, this one and only Jesus whom we call the Christ, was the same one whom Saul encountered on a road to Damascus to participate in the persecution of the Followers of the Way. Saul was knocked off his donkey as Saul and as a result of this encounter had his name changed; his name changed to Paul. This Christian tradition we know and love dearly, existed as a fledgling community of people in the first century trying to figure out whether or not to continue with their Jewish traditions and simultaneously trying not to run afoul of the Roman government. What we now recognize as the first century church was a bunch of disparate groups across the region, many of whom were meeting in some form of secrecy, telling the story about a man from Galilee who not only healed the sick and raised the dead, but that he himself was a revenant that was crucified, dead and buried and yet himself had the testimony of resurrection as well.

It is generally agreed that the belief in such a story and aligning oneself with such a radical and yes revolutionary tradition in the first century, going around preaching the Gospel, is what resulted in the man some call John the Revelator, to be exiled to the island of Patmos. It was here on this rocky spit of land in the Aegean Sea that this John found himself cut off from society, banished from the mainland and forced to live a life isolated from those in whom he found community.

Isolation, usually, is not fun. It is not a walk in the park especially if it's involuntary and been forced on you. It is a form of manipulating and mistreating humanity when you are forcibly isolated in the way that John was to the Island of Patmos, and it is no more egregious than in the way that those from the West African tribes located all the way from Senegambia to the Bight of Benin and Biafra were physically dragged from their native homeland and forced to be unwilling participants in the Atlantic slave trade. The isolation from one's native group is an experience that many of us under the sound of my voice don't have first hand knowledge. Perhaps through the lens of history and the recorded accounts of slaves during the Depression Era WPA projects, or hearing the modern day stories of children who survive the perils of war in foreign countries who make their way to the United States seeking asylum, refuge or even medical care, one can see just what toll it takes on humanity to be disconnected and isolated from every thing that is familiar to you. This is why it is

all the more curious that this John in the midst of an epistolary introduction pauses and offers praise to Jesus as the Christ and King. To put a fine point on this, John offers a doxological interruption to the general flow of what's considered the natural order of things.

Conventionally, if an encyclical epistolary is produced it would follow the traditional ordering found in many of the Pauline epistles where the introduction is well the introduction—stating who the author is, the intended audience and bringing specific greetings to individuals. Yet, here it is in the midst of John's isolated status, the author of this passage decides to take a praise break. Is that not what a doxological interruption is? A doxology, as most of you know well, is that liturgical saying or hymn, that offers praise to God. Seeing as how this particular doxology is not found at the end of a passage, much like Jude's famous "Now unto the One who is able to keep up falling," but rather this one in Revelation is found in the middle of the passage, it disrupts and breaks the continuity of the introduction. So, for me, this doxological interruption is nothing more than a praise break.

In the African American Pentecostal worship traditions that still have unprogrammed worship service, invoking the same spirit of the Quaker traditions that once encouraged unprogrammed service, there comes a moment in which either the music through voice or instrumentation or even the preaching invokes what is colloquially known as a praise break. Yea even on yesterday, as I was attending an ordination service here in Durham, as the group of singers finished singing Milton Brunson's "Safe in His Arms" what could best be described as a praise break erupted in the midst of the service. The drummer hit a beat on the bass drum and the praise break began. It was not programmed. It was not planned. It may not even had been anticipated by the worship leaders. But it happened. To put it succinctly, there were doxological utterances and interruptions that were all over the building. Yet, as I interrogate the text here in Revelation, and I see where John is—on the Island of Patmos, knowing where John possibly comes from; knowing what John's situation is; knowing that it's bleak; knowing that it's perilous; knowing that hope at best may be a distant star far from the reaching of attainability, I can't help but ask the question to John—John, how is it that you can offer praise to God in the midst of your isolation? On this Christ the King Sunday, John, I want to know how can Jesus be your Christ, and Christ be your king while sitting in exile and isolated from every thing that is familiar from you?

This is not an unfamiliar question for us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century no more than it is a familiar question that rings from the halls of temporal antiquity. As I said earlier, isolation can take on many forms both physically and psychologically. A personal sickness in one's own life can isolate you from a relationship with God because of that simple question of "Why?" that can form so easily in your head. Watching a loved one suffer under the pain of a domestic abuse situation all the way to sitting beside them as they painfully carry on while living with a debilitating illness; knowing the possible isolation care givers may feel knowing that there's very few people who are able to be care givers to the care givers. Isolation also occurs in those poor people across the world who are locked out of a system that seems beset on keeping the poor eternally poor and banished from hope for a better tomorrow. Isolation occurs on college campuses even as we speak; black students that feel isolated from the collegiate powers-that-be in response to a defacing of a poster with a racial slur and a noose hanging on campus or LGBTQ students that feel isolated away from the umbrella of safety that is understood be protection for all students when a direct threat is made on the life of a student. Isolation occurs as citizens feel the net of safety ripped away from them whether on the streets of

Paris, the forced isolation to a Second America of sorts where black and brown bodies live in fear of police officers, or a community that experiences isolation from all that makes right and good sense in the world when a gunman walks into a movie theater or a classroom full of kindergartners.

How do you offer praise to God in the midst of that?

John gives us a hint at how to do that by the first line of the doxology that says “To him that loved us...” That’s enough for me. To know that even in the midst of this, God still loves us. To know that even when things just don’t seem like they’re going the way they should, God loves us. Paul helps us out when he says “We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; Persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed.” Even looking back to the Old Testament to people like Job who was isolated in a very visceral way from all that he was accustomed to—plucked away from his wife and his children and to someone like John here in Revelation who was ripped away from society, conventional wisdom would dictate that isolation from the familiar *should* result in an isolation from God. But in both of these cases of Job and John, both said no. As the story goes, Job consistently stayed in conversation with God even when God was silent and apparently not listening. Even here, on the island of Patmos, John, like Job finds a way to stay connected.

Perhaps through my sanctified imagination, I would make the argument that for John, he maintained this connection with God in the midst of his isolation through his knowing that God in Christ Jesus, still loved him. I would submit for others that there may many other things that are still keeping you tethered to the one who was, who is and who is to come. For you see, this doxological interruption acts as a fulcrum point that leverages John’s physical isolation with his apocalyptic eschatology—that’s just a fancy way of saying his revelation. In this passage I see John’s isolation does not prevent his adoration of God in Christ Jesus and ultimately provides a very particular revelation. This revelation allows us to understand God in yet one more way.

The biblical narrative is complete with names for God and other names for the Christological manifestation of God in Jesus and these names have been the direct result of an encounter and experience with God. For example, the writer of the Song of Songs knows God as the Rose of Sharon and the Lilly of the Valley; the writer of Isaiah encountered God as the Wonderful Counselor, the Mighty God, the Prince of Peace and the Everlasting Father; in exile, isolated, Ezekiel encountered God as wheel, in the middle of a wheel; the writer of Colossians sees Jesus as the image of the invisible God and the writer of Hebrews see him as the author and finisher of our faith. Here in today’s passage, through isolation and adoration John shares this revelation of God as the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end; the one is was, who was and is yet to come.

For those that pay attention to grammar and understand especially how the English language works to our understanding and reading of scripture, one can’t help but recall the story of God’s encounter with Moses at the burning bush in Exodus. At this holy encounter with a bush that did not burn, God tells Moses that God has heard the cries of the Hebrews and is going to see about them. God tells Moses to tell Pharaoh “to let my people go.” Moses, understanding that he needed something

else to assure his authority before going to Pharaoh, stands with his sandals off of his feet, his toes encrusted in the dust and he is physically connected to the earthen ground, the same ground that has produced this bush that doesn't burn, Moses stares into the fire and asks the simple question "And who shall I say sent me." The Voice from the bush says "Tell them that the conjugation of 'TO BE' has sent you." I think it not coincidence that at the end of our canon we are also introduced to this Johannine apocalyptic conjugation of God.

If anyone who has taken a foreign language at the introductory level already knows that one of the first lessons learned is how to do conjugations. And in conjugating you learn past, present and future—in that order. But John, here in Revelation does something different. The first title that he gives to God, revealed in Christ Jesus, is "the One who is, the one who was and the one who is to come." The *is*-ness of Jesus takes precedence for John. In the midst of an isolating situation, the *is*-ness of Jesus is what allows him to have offer up a praise unto God. The *is*-ness of Jesus is what anchors John to have the ability to maintain his sanity the midst of what is certainly a mess.

Praising God in the middle of one's situation may not change the situation, but it may change you in the situation. David danced out of his clothes and Psalm 150 instructs that the full list of available instruments should be used and also instructs that everything that has breath to praise the Lord—and none of these instances did the situation fundamentally change, but the individuals and groups in the situation were changed. Why? Because expressing praise vocally requires one to psychologically engage in a particular way that allows various neurological synapses to be created and ultimately it results in a different type of engagement potentially allowing whole body—mind, body and spirit—to encounter God. Praising God can fundamentally change you in the middle of your situation. Praising God connects you with the divine outside of just the head space, but begins to work on the heart. The heartstrings are connected to God in a way unique from that the mind. Praise removes God from just being an intellectual exercise one engages in for the sake of mental stimulation, but makes God very tangible; it makes God the one who is; the present-ness of God; the essence of Emmanuel, God with us.

I submit to you today, don't be afraid to give God praise even when conventional wisdom says not to; the God who was with you in the beginning—the Alpha, is the same God who will be with you until the end—that's the Omega. This revelation of Jesus that John offers, positions Jesus with you in the present—right now—and in the future beckoning us to come into an uncertain future yet with a unassailable hope. No matter what the situation, John's revelation of Jesus gives us this blessed assurance as the One who is to come as a place of refuge and citadel of hope in a world that has been turned upside down. For John, this praise break acts as a lynchpin that holds together his righteous mind—connected to the God of love and to the One who was. Ever thankful for the One who is—who is providing him the peace that surpasses understanding. And ever watchful and waiting for the One who is yet to come, for the one standing in the next breath of the moment ever calling the faithful to step forward and be the ones we've been waiting for.