

Psalm 98
May 9, 2021

New Things

Andrew Carnegie worked his way up in a railroad company from the time of his youth. By the 1860s he was building bridges including a railroad bridge across the Mississippi River in St. Louis, which would transform the way people and goods were moved.

At the time, rivers were difficult obstacles for trains, and freight had to be ferried across, taking time and expense. There were a few bridges over the river to the north, but the below the Missouri the river was too wide for the bridge-building technology of the day. His idea was to build the bridge out of steel.

When I was growing up in St. Louis, there were school field trips to the riverfront where we learned about the Eads Bridge (Eads was the architect), the first bridge in the world made wholly out of steel. When my sons were young and we lived in Southern Illinois, we would park on the Illinois side and ride the Metro trains across the bridge to downtown St. Louis to see Cardinal games.

The top level of the bridge is used for automobile and pedestrian traffic. When it was first opened in 1874 people were hesitant to use it. It was tested it by marching an elephant across it, under the belief that elephants had an instinct about such things and would not go across a structure that could not support their weight. A few weeks later, on July 4, 1874, the bridge

was opened with a parade that stretched 15 miles through the streets of St. Louis.

The world was changed in many ways not the least of which is that not only bridges, but entire cities all over the world, are made out of steel, along with concrete and glass. In the history of the world, it is still a recent phenomenon, a new thing.

There is a long list of new things that came along with the rise of steel; automobiles and airplanes and rocket ships, electricity and landscape changing dams for hydro-electric power, radio and television and binary code driven devices that steal our attention for many hours of the day, computers and smart phones, some are such recent inventions that even the young can remember life before they came.

It is all new. Is it all good? Is it worth the grand parade. My suspicion is that if we were to take that question seriously, we would give mixed reviews. We would decide that some of the results of the new things have been good, but that some have not. We enjoy new benefits. We suffer new pains.

The more pertinent question for us to consider this morning is perhaps something like this; when the psalmist wrote, "sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvelous things," what were the marvelous things to which he was referring and how do they compare and contrast with the modern marvels of human beings?

Of course, the marvelous deeds of the Lord are not the same as the modern human achievements. But what are they? The word is, “Salvation.” Salvation means a number of things to us. First, and surely foremost, it has to do with being rescued from death, quite literally.

There are other things. We are saved from the results of sin, guilt and condemnation, so we also think in terms of forgiveness. We are saved from broken relationships, so we think in terms of reconciliation. We are also saved from bad health, illness and disease, so we think in terms of healing. We are saved from despair and sorrow and emptiness, so we think of fulfillment and abundance. Of course, one of the great human realities is that everyone dies thus no one is permanently saved from any of these things.

Our faith tells us about the reality of the spiritual life that transcends the body and physical existence. As believers we are taught that each one of us is born of the spirit as well as the flesh. Salvation is thus linked to a higher quality in this life, and life beyond death as well. These are the marvelous deeds of the Lord.

The psalmist doesn't really go in to much detail about any of these things, but is enamored simply by the fact of salvation,

“The Lord has made his salvation known
and revealed his righteousness to the nations.
He has remembered his love
and his faithfulness to Israel;

all the ends of the earth have seen
the salvation of our God.”

It is as if like the modern structures that stand empty and grave, lifeless, until the people enter them and give them life, we stand empty and lifeless until we have been filled with the Spirit, the fulness of life in its variety and peculiarity and rich beauty, enabling each to participate fully in the wonders of “life,” now and forever. All of life is grace. I believe that if we studied it we would conclude that even the good accomplishments of human beings, are grace.

And it is a grand thing, more astonishingly grand than steel bridges and modern buildings. May we never forget the marvelous celebration of life to which we are called, with these words;

“Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth,
burst into jubilant song with music;
make music to the Lord with the harp,
with the harp and the sound of singing,
with trumpets and the blast of the ram's horn—
shout for joy before the Lord, the King.
Let the sea resound, and everything in it,
the world, and all who live in it.
Let the rivers clap their hands,
let the mountains sing together for joy . . .”

And may we be given the grace to notice the way all these old songs manage to sound forever new to our ears. Imagine the parade.

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