

Keeping Hope Alive

I Peter 1:3-9

On September 5, 2001 (less than a week before 9-11) in Halberstadt, Germany, the first sound of a rather unique organ composition was heard. The title of the piece? “As Slow as Possible” by the late American composer, John Cage. To make this theme abundantly clear, the last note of this organ concert is slated to be heard in the year 2640, meaning it will take 639 years to complete!

The venue itself is unique. St. Burchardi Church—a medieval chapel constructed in the year 1050—has been used as a monastery, barn, distillery, and a pigsty; however, it is also home for a medieval Blockwerk organ, the forerunner to the modern organ—this one having been built in 1361—640 years prior to the beginning of this performance (hence, the reason for its absurd length). According to one observation:

It was surely an auspicious moment on September 5, 2001, as the performance commenced, albeit a tad anticlimactic. The piece begins with silence, you see. Several counts’ worth. This is, after all, the composer who brought us the famous, soundless “4’33” composition...From September 5th to February 2003, the only sound was the low whoosh of the electric bellows as they filled with air in preparation for striking that first chord.

Finally, on February 5, 2003, it happened. The first chord. Then, on July 5, 2004, notes were added and the tone changed. January 5, 2006 saw a chord change (changes always occur on the fifth day of the month in honor of Cage and his birth date).

And here’s where it gets exciting. On July 5, 2008, the weights holding down the organ pedals were shifted. Two more organ pipes have been added alongside the four installed and at 3:33 pm local time, the sixth chord change in the piece occurred. The crowd of 1,000 gathered for the event murmured appreciatively at the increased tonal complexity. Then, thirty seconds later, upon realizing that was it, that was all that was going to happen that day, that month, they commenced a spattering of uncertain applause that grew heartier as officials confirmed the full change had actualized.¹

¹ “John Cage’s ‘As Slow As Possible,’” www.theclassicalgirl.com.

The drama continued with an additional chord change on October 5, 2013. But that's it until September 5, 2020, when the next notes of "As Slow as Possible" will be heard. Book your travel arrangements now—standing room only.

Needless to say, the novelty of this composition and performance might provoke artistic debate, but not much inspiration of musical value. No one will live long enough to get through but a few lines of the score, if even that. The notes and chords are so isolated and disconnected that it will be difficult to make any sense of the relationship between the periodic sounds emitted from the organ.

Yet, this ambitious project cast upon an unknown future still assumes that someday the piece will be completed—that there will be enough interest in this performance that those yet to be born (including half a millennium from now) will take notice and continue fulfilling the dreams of Cage and his many followers. Who knows?

When you think about it, this is quite a claim of faith, trusting the future to complete something begun in the distant past. Some might say it's a bit presumptuous. For one thing, can anything on earth be *guaranteed* over that span of time? Who can really expect there will be future performers, or those that won't alter the composer's work based on new discoveries and knowledge or different interests, styles, and emphases? Even if something remarkable is launched in one era, an endless number of variables come into play determining the eventual outcome, whatever that might be. For this performance, will future efforts reflect the composer's worldview, experience, or original intent? In 2640, will St. Burchardi Church still be standing in Halberstadt, Germany with an organ bellowing out sounds from this score?

A performance such as this puts a lot of things into perspective, especially the trust we humans place in the process and evolution of time. At most, we project into the future based on what we know in the present, but it never fully accounts for all the development and changes which come over long periods of time. How can one be sure that the original spirit of the composer will still be valued and expressed in the distant future?

To be fair, time tends not to be a friend of tradition. For the most part, traditions are symbolic representations or mythologized memories of an original experience or innovation that get passed on to succeeding generations (e.g., family traditions, community celebrations, national holidays, etc.). Religious traditions start out as rituals of remembrance before standardized beliefs and doctrines are added over time, expanding on the meaning of the essential memory. However, if the original memory and spirit get lost, it's hard to maintain interest in the tradition.

I think that's what we're beginning to see in recent years with Christianity. What I mean is, we've begun to see a break in the generational pattern of passing forward the faith to a succeeding generation, at least as a cultural inheritance in this country—traditions and beliefs that have been passed on through ceremony, catechism, and custom. This has created a bit of a crisis in many families, as well as denominations and houses of worship. Religious faith has become for many much like Cage's composition maintaining its long-running and sonorous performance over the course of time. It exists, but is hardly noticeable in the overall scheme of things. Periodically, there's a "chord" change that stirs up attention for a short while, only to settle back into the background once again.

For many, the original spirit of Christianity has been lost in the trappings of tradition and with dogmas that haven't adapted to the

changing world and multiple paradigms for meaning. This skeptical age demands answers that previous ones didn't as to how one religious tradition can presume more spiritual authority over any other, especially in our increasingly pluralistic world. Likewise, in an era with ready access to endless sources of knowledge, claims of unquestionable truth and infallibility seem bogus and manipulative.

So many cultural developments and scientific discoveries have come to light since Jesus walked the earth that to maintain traditional Christian beliefs requires suspending, not only the laws of nature, but the ways in which we routinely acquire and apply knowledge. Educated, empirically-trained minds want freedom to reinterpret or disregard texts that conflict with a more enlightened view of physics, archaeology, anthropology, not to mention gender equality and social inclusion. People want religion to inform and guide them, not control their thinking, as it often did in the past. You can't blame those who have left religion altogether. They want something more meaningful than passed on beliefs. For our faith to continue to be a living hope, it must recover its original spirit and be a realistic and relevant source of insight and meaning, suitable for dealing with the challenges of our world; otherwise, it will either die off or be merely retained for the sake of posterity.

This is very evident to me in reading our text for today, where an emotional distance exists between us and those to whom these words were originally addressed. The stunning and celebratory pronouncement about the meaning of Jesus' resurrection as a living hope simply won't land on us with anywhere near the emotional and spiritual impact it had on the writer's audience, the first generation or two after Jesus lived.

There's a good reason for this: the original spirit and power behind early Christianity and its proclamation differs quite significantly from our inherited tradition. What I mean is, the faith we inherited derives from the *imperial* form of Christianity, which arose in the fourth century when Emperor Constantine, following a victorious military campaign, made Christ the Lord of the Roman Empire and the God of the powerful—equating the power of the state with the glorification of Christ, as a part of the pantheon of divine activity in imperial mythology. The relationship between Christ and imperial power has largely remained intact to this day where, throughout Western civilization, Christendom has dominated, if not defined, entire cultures. The risen Lord is portrayed as the divine authority and judge over all the earth—a bedrock belief of Western culture, inspiring everything from the brutality of war to the beauty reflected in art, music, philosophy, and the garish architecture of religious institutions. For all intents and purposes, Christianity became imperial mythology—the sacred power behind kings and nations.

Our experience with resurrection is quite different from those to whom this letter was addressed—they who were a persecuted minority struggling to maintain their hope and presence. By the end of the first century, followers of Jesus, mockingly called “Christians,” were punished for their countercultural beliefs and ways (particularly their insistence that a new kingdom was coming to replace imperial Rome). Those among the lowest classes were routinely scapegoated and shamed—slaves often taunted and abused by their masters—ordinary agape meals (“love feasts”) were slanderously portrayed in public as vile orgies. Reputedly, Nero even used the bodies of arrested Christians as human torches to light parts of the Appian Way.

Amidst this terrible suffering, the hope of Jesus Christ was threefold: for the healing and protection of their lives, for the great reversal of fortune promised by Jesus of when the last shall be first through divine justice, and for the supremely important assurance that even in death, they would be ultimately saved by the risen Lord, whose resurrection was a sign of things to come.

By his great mercy, he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

The underlying message was this: keep hope alive, despite what you're going through, for what you will inherit is a life better than the present. The last shall be first, ultimate justice shall be forthcoming, the meek will inherit the earth, even if it requires your resurrection from the dead to make this come true!

The power of this message was supremely compelling to many who were suffering, but otherwise emotionally distant from most people who weren't—much like it was centuries later for African men and women and their descendants forced into slavery in America—a hope voiced in the volume of spirituals—songs still sung today in churches, without sensing the context and suffering of the original singers. The story of Jesus was spiritually compelling to those who needed to keep hope alive:

Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

This is what made Jesus' resurrection a living hope! It wasn't a theological doctrine about Jesus' divinity passed down through the centuries—it was a divine reversal of destiny for the poor and wrongly condemned of this

world. It wasn't a free pass of divine grace for those who were making out quite well in the imperial world—the world of Caesars, slavemasters, and dominate powers. It was for those being crushed by that world! It was an intended message for those who had no hope stemming from their experience and status in life. The greatest strain on anyone's credulity is to imagine how the words of *original* Christianity would even fit into the world of *imperial* Christianity without losing their true meaning and impact! Which, of course, happened.

Perhaps that is why maintaining the tradition and ceremony of the Christian faith isn't enough for keeping hope alive. The Spirit of our faith isn't maintained by dogmas and doctrines, but through life experiences. I am inclined to believe the decline in organized religion is not so much a threat to Christianity, but the beginning of its redemption—the only way to redeem its original spirit and hope.

Maybe this present generation is the one that will finally bring about the demise of imperial Christianity. Around the globe institutional scandals, corruption, and greed have made people weary of religion that has been for so long a pawn of privileged interests. They yearn for spiritual truth that challenges and corrects what is inauthentic, irrelevant, and meaningless. It's not that they have given up on Jesus—they've only given up on the church of the imperial world.

It would be well for us to remember that our present year, 2017, marks the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation (October 31). When Martin Luther posted 95 common complaints against the corruption of the Roman Catholic Church on the doors of the Wittenberg cathedral, it unleashed a revolutionary spirit that forever altered the course of Christianity. Much of what needed to be reformed was related to

Christendom's place in the imperial state. Luther and others wanted to return Christianity back to its liberating roots—to recover the original spirit of the faith that had been sorely lost. In some ways, they succeeded; but over time, they didn't. Imperial Christianity still dominates.

So, it's time to do it again; we need to recover the spiritual meaning and purpose of Christianity with its transformative power. We must make it once again a liberating hope for those in life who need it most—those who suffer unjustly and immorally from those who control the interests of power and privilege. We must proclaim our faith as a redemptive hope for those who never stand a chance against the unbearable forces of life that oppress them. We must reform our faith so that it expresses in daily life the profound teachings and provocative proclamation of Jesus of Nazareth, not the orthodox doctrines, traditions, quaint moralisms, and imperial interests that so often blunt the social and economic intentions of the Gospel.

It's time to strike the first notes of a new composition, a new song whose initial sounds are already being heard. It will take a while to complete this great masterpiece, very likely generations before the notes come together enough to gain a sense of what the ultimate melody will be. But it is already beginning. The spirit behind this new creation is looking ahead for the future of our faith, not for the sake of preserving the past—it's to be faithful for our descendants, not to those who came before us.

What comes from this new reformation will benefit those who will follow us for centuries to come, who will pick up this score and play its melody, adding their own notes, harmonies, and dissonance to complete the music. If we listen intently and play our part, we will catch the original spirit of our faith that is taking hold of so many, who are joining in this

song for the ages that won't be fully known until the Day arrives when the final note is played.

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