

**The Big Story**  
**Acts 2:1-42**  
**Pentecost Sunday**  
**June 12, 2011**

**PART I**

Dedicating a hymnal is a witness to our determination to keep singing our faith. But it's not Dedication Sunday that makes singing matter the most. Singing matters most when we have to fling it against the darkness: Precious Lord, take my hand. Through the night let it stand. Singing matters most when it is mixed with the cries of oppression. "We shall overcome some day." I grew up listening to Billy Graham crowds singing "Just As I Am," and Martin Luther King, Jr. crowds singing, "We Shall Overcome." Combined, we get the singing of an evangelical social gospel. If you never know anything else about me, please know that my heart is sustained by "Just As I Am" and "We Shall Overcome".

There's something about singing that increases our faith, puts courage in our hearts, grit and gumption in our stomachs. The movie, *Paradise Road*, tells the story of a group of women surviving a brutal WWII prison camp by singing. Another WWII prison camp song was "The Peat Bog Soldiers," a protest song sung in a Nazi POW camp. A protest song, it was a symbol of resistance. Two of the greatest movements in our history were fueled by songs: The Social Gospel and the Civil Rights Movement.[i] Martin Luther said, "As long as we live, there is never enough singing." The singing matters most when God's people have to screw their courage to the wall against oppression, against massive evil, against tyranny. Singing is a symbol of our commitment to the Big Story of our Faith. After all, Christianity has always had a big story.[ii] And to make that statement is to say that we have a history, and what's more, that history matters.

Luke, in forming the book of Acts, creates rhetorical versions of the big story. In summary form: God's self-giving love and goodness in a good creation, covenant, judgment, mercy, incarnation, atonement, resurrection, wind and fire, and recreation, and this story is told from Genesis to Revelation.[iii] And the key figure in this drama: Jesus.

Something about this big story made the preachers bold beyond all human caution and without concern for their heads. Within days of the Pentecost experience, Stephen has been stoned to death for preaching the gospel. Before the end of the first century, all the apostles have been killed for keeping the faith. On March 10, 1528, Balthasar Hubmaier was burned at the stake. Three days later, his wife Elizabeth was thrown into the Danube River with a rock around her neck. The martyrs believed the Big Story was the story. We are heirs of this kind of faith. To paraphrase Montaigne, "To do theology is to learn to die." There's a persuasive power in the images of faithful witnesses proclaiming the gospel and going forth to die, and there's not much impact in the image

of atheists saying “There is no god,” cashing royalty checks, and going out to drinks and dinner.

Paul says, “Be filled with the Spirit, as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” We sing because we have a Savior. We sing because we have a home. We sing because we have within us the Song of the Lamb and the power of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The more we sing our story, the more our story is formed in our consciousness and in our character.

There’s a power in the church singing together the big story. Paul and Silas, praying and singing from the jail in Philippi caused an earthquake and the doors of the prison were thrown open. Instead of escaping, Paul and Silas stayed to preach the gospel.<sup>[iv]</sup> Singing puts courage in our hearts.<sup>[v]</sup> John has a vision of God’s work culminating in all the saints from every tribe and language and people and nation singing a new song; and in a restored earth, God has made them to be a kingdom and priests serving him.” Dare we say it? The Empire of God. Bruce Springsteen, “Keep Your Eyes on the Prize.”

## PART II

The Big Story of Christian faith has always had challenges – from heresies within and from hostile powers from without. When Peter preached on Pentecost, some sneered and accused him of being drunk. His retort, I’m not drunk, it’s not even nine in the morning is one of my favorites reminding me of the Southern lady who asked her husband to fix her a martini at 11 in the morning because “Honey, it’s dark under the porch.”

Two major challenges to the church have been modernity and post-modernity. I don’t want you turned off by this kind of jargon so by modernity I mean the modern western world from the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the present. By post-modernity, I mean the critique and deconstruction of modernity which offers us reality that we get to make up as we go.

Now, the church has done a brisk business with the trinity of modernity: the confident individual who says, “I am in charge and can do as I please;” the certainty of facts and objective knowledge (Someone said that facts, like telescopes and wigs for gentlemen, were an 18<sup>th</sup> century invention); and the mythology of progress. Of all people, the paleontologist (not the science of reporting the actions of Sarah Palin), Stephen Jay Gould, says that “progress does not mark the history of life.” He claimed that progress was a delusion based on social prejudice and psychological hope.

Perhaps no group has spent more time at Modernity Pub swilling the intoxicating drinks than Baptists. Baptists, schooled in Scottish “common sense” philosophy, assume they

have all the “religious experience” they need. So we assert our right to do as we please about just about anything we please.

Stanley Hauerwas says that we should stop giving the Bible to all children when they enter the third grade. “Let us rather tell them and their parents that they are possessed by habits far too corrupt for them to be encouraged to read the Bible on their own.”<sup>[vi]</sup> We are trained to believe that we can take or leave the Bible and read it without spiritual and moral transformation. After all, we feel no need to stand under the authority of a truthful community to be told how to read.

The second challenge has been post-modernity. In the post-modern world, facts are not important; spin is everything. Reality is whatever you make of it. You make it up as you go along. As one speaker said with enthusiasm, **“Today, attitudes are more important than facts, and we can document that!”**

Our big story is now broken down into little stories, held in suspicion of being power grabs and the church as a conspiracy determined to hang on to earthly power. But this is not the Big Story of the Bible; this is its perversion. That the church, has from time to time accepted the temptations of the devil, the same ones Jesus rejected, doesn’t make our big story untrue; it simply shows the church is capable of unfaithfulness.<sup>[vii]</sup>

Thus we are left in the confused state of thinking that we either have to embrace a naïve, enchanted (to use Charles Taylor’s language from his book, *A Secular Age*) pre-modern world view or we have to reject the Christian story. There is, however, another way, but for now hold in tension our two thoughts: There is a Christian Big Story and there have been major intellectual challenges to that story.

### PART III

Our big story needs a new hearing – a new Pentecost perhaps. The current chaos in the American church is not the answer. We must have a church more serious about its calling and with a higher goal than attracting crowds.

On the Day of Pentecost Peter preached in his native tongue, and the Holy Spirit produced a new hearing to those in the audience. Today, the church, trying to please everyone and anybody, tries to preach and sing in all the tongues of the world.

I am more interested in doing theology that is a joyful celebration of our big story and not a desperate attempt to keep people interested. The church must always struggle against the bewitching power of the world. The church has a theological task to speak honestly of the complexities of life and anything less than that is a betrayal of our calling. For a number of years I have been preaching that being called by God is a life-and-death matter. I have pushed you to participate more in worship, to accept the catholic nature of our faith, to not put so much trust in unbridled individualism, to retrieve

the Christian meanings and practices embedded in Scripture and the tradition of the church. At times I have even been hopeful.[viii]

Pentecost was a shattering of an old way of looking at the world. To borrow the argument between Toulmin and Kuhn, we might ask if Pentecost was a revolutionary or evolutionary paradigm shift. When it comes to the work of the Holy Spirit, I am a believer in evolutionary development; in other words, the ongoing work of prevenient grace. God is always at work for our salvation and for our ultimate good. It is hard, however, for us to see differently, to hear differently, or to change at all. Pentecost was an experience of see the world again for the first time. It had always been there and it had its antecedents – Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the flames and there appeared a fourth person, like a son of god, walking in the fire with them. “To work at seeing the world as though one were seeing it for the first time is to get rid of the conventional and routine vision we have of things, to discover a brute, naïve vision of reality, to take note of the splendor of the world, which habitually escapes us.” As Wittgenstein put it, “To repeat: don’t think, but look.” In this case looking means seeing the world differently.

What we long for is a singing, praying, preaching, testifying, faithful unto death ecclesia – a church of Pentecost.

We have a huge opportunity, right here and right now, for serious, intelligent, and joyful Christian mission to the post-postmodern world. Someone said that the church is finally ready for the 1950s! God help a church living in the past glory. We have to be ready to live here and now. The church can’t afford the luxury of a naïve, pre-modern world view.

Please don’t mistake these words as a presumption of privilege, but I’m asking you to follow me to the leading edge of the whole culture, articulating in story and song and art and philosophy and education and poetry and politics and theology/ethics and biblical studies, a worldview which will mount the historically grounded Christian challenge to modernity and postmodernity and to do so with joy and humor and gentleness and good judgment and wisdom. Finally we will have the church singing her songs and leading the parade into a different view of the world.

This asks of you a patronage of an intelligent, passionate, devoted church. The Christian church, beginning with the scholarship of St. Paul, and continuing with the philosopher-rhetorical-preachers of the first four centuries provide us a model for ministry and church that once again deserves not only our respect but our support. This means a serious effort to retrieve what is useful and appropriate from the first four centuries of the church and to create a new version of the church.

We need a church, a Pentecost church. For this we will need to hear and accept and embrace a new hearing of the old big story.

Pentecost is not a church learning to speak the language of the world. Pentecost is the church having the confidence and the boldness to speak her big story and the world understanding. In other words, our task is learning how to speak Christian language and trust the Holy Spirit to interpret it for the world in all its many tongues. And that will be our Pentecost!

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[i]

Paul and Silas bound in jail  
Had no money for to go their bail  
Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on

Paul and Silas thought they was lost  
Dungeon shook and the chains come off  
Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on

Freedom's name is mighty sweet  
And soon we're gonna meet  
Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on

I got my hand on the gospel plow  
Won't take nothing for my journey now  
Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on

Hold on, hold on  
Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on

Soozie!

Only chain that a man can stand  
Is that chain o' hand on hand  
Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on

I'm gonna board that big greyhound  
Carry the love from town to town  
Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on

Hold on, hold on  
Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on

Hey!

Hey!

Now only thing I did was wrong  
Stayin' in the wilderness too long  
Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on

The only thing we did was right  
Was the day we started to fight  
Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on

Hold on, hold on  
Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on

One, two!  
(The only thing we did was wrong)  
(Staying in the wilderness too long)  
(Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on)

Yes, how many years can some people exist

Before they're allowed to be free?

Yes, how many times can a man turn his head  
Pretending he just doesn't see?

The answer my friend is blowin' in the wind.

Yes, how many ears must one man have

Before he can hear people cry?

The answer is blowin' in the wind.

Mavis Staples,

We shall not be moved

Just like a tree that planted by the water

We shall not be moved

We're fighting for our freedom

We're fighting for our children

We shall not be moved

Black and white together

We shall not be moved.

Mahalia Jackson---We Shall Overcome

We shall overcome, we shall overcome,

We shall overcome someday;

Oh, deep in my heart, I do believe,

We shall overcome someday.

The Lord will see us through, The Lord will see us through,

The Lord will see us through someday;

Oh, deep in my heart, I do believe,  
We shall overcome someday.

We're on to victory, We're on to victory,  
We're on to victory someday;  
Oh, deep in my heart, I do believe,  
We're on to victory someday.

We'll walk hand in hand, we'll walk hand in hand,  
We'll walk hand in hand someday;  
Oh, deep in my heart, I do believe,  
We'll walk hand in hand someday.

We are not afraid, we are not afraid,  
We are not afraid today;  
Oh, deep in my heart, I do believe,  
We are not afraid today.

The truth shall set us free , the truth shall set us free,  
The truth shall set us free someday;  
Oh, deep in my heart, I do believe,  
The truth shall set us free someday.

We shall live in peace, we shall live in peace,  
We shall live in peace someday;  
Oh, deep in my heart, I do believe,  
We shall live in peace someday.

O holy city, seen of John,  
Where Christ the Lamb, doth reign,  
Within whose foursquare walls shall come  
No night, nor need, nor pain,  
And where the tears are wiped from eyes  
That shall not weep again.

Hark, how from men whose lives are held  
More cheap than merchandise,  
From women struggling sore for bread,  
From little children's cries,  
There swells the sobbing human plaint  
That bids thy walls arise.

O shame to us who rest content  
While lust and greed for gain  
In street and shop and tenement  
Wring gold from human pain,

And bitter lips in blind despair  
Cry "Christ hath died in vain!"

Give us, O God, the strength to build  
The city that hath stood  
Too long a dream, whose laws are love,  
Whose crown is servanthood,  
And where the sun that shineth is  
God's grace for human good.

Already in the mind of God  
That city riseth fair:  
Lo, how its splendor challenges  
The souls that greatly dare;  
Yea, bids us seize the whole of life  
And build its glory there.

[ii] "It is the voice of the Church," says Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "that is heard in singing together."

[iii] "Jesus of Nazareth, crucified, but God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power. Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you both see and hear. God has made Jesus both Lord and Messiah.' Repent therefore, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that he may send the Messiah appointed for you, that is, Jesus, who must remain in heaven until the time of **universal restoration** that God announced long ago through his holy prophets."

[iv] In 1569, an Anabaptist named Dirk Willems was running from a bounty hunter. He made it over some thin ice safely, but his pursuer fell into the freezing water. Dirk turned back to save the life of the bounty hunter. The authorities then arrested Dirk and he was burned at the stake. His last two deeds were saving a drowning man's life and dying with dignity and faith in the God who ultimately rescues all who trust in him.

[v] The Book of Revelation which paints a picture of a new heaven and a new earth, a restored earth and not a raptured people is filled with singing. "They sing a new song: You are worthy for you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God saints from every tribe and language and people and nation; you have made them to be a kingdom and priests serving our God." Dare we say it? The Empire of God. John saw a vision of the church that had conquered the beast standing beside the sea of glass with harps of God in their hands. And they sing the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb: "Great and amazing are your deeds, Lord God the Almighty! Just and true are your ways, King of the nations! Lord, who will not fear and

glorify your name? For you alone are holy. All nations will come and worship before you, for your judgments have been revealed.” The power of the poetic over the flat, one-dimensional literal prose of the world. “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God” (Colossians 3:16).

[vi] Stanley Hauerwas, *Unleashing the Scripture: Freeing the Bible from Captivity to America*, p. 15.

[vii] The Bible, the written source of our treasure, the Big Story, has been especially battered by post-modern thought. I can only guess how many Christians are more interested in the proto-gnostic Gospel of Thomas than the Big Story gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Christians read the bits of Scripture they like and give them the spin that suits them, and use them as weapons against the people with whom they disagree. What all this confusion means is like saying, “I agree with the Bible when it agrees with me.”

[viii] I see a little light and some willingness on your part to break free from the restrictions of a church over-formed by modernity. Still, some of you want to go back to a pre-modern form of literalism that I find deadening and suffocating. Like prisoners of war suddenly set free, the fresh light of freedom is so frightening, you turn around and walk back into the pre-modern cave unsullied by the march of science and technology. Others of you want to go forward into a brave new world of a pantheon of gnostic scholars and a theological liberalism that so values freedom as to have no meaning at all.