

“SUMMER PSALMS” part 1

Psalm 65

July 31, 2016 – Rev. Jerry Duggins

Herbert Anderson, a professor at the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Berkeley CA, wrote: “Whenever I wonder whether or not God understands the human struggle, I read a psalm.... Whenever I wonder what God is doing in the world or even if God is active in the world, I read a psalm.... Whenever I wonder why I should be grateful, I read a Psalm” (pp. 224, 226).

Whether you’re a seminary professor or a young Christian new to the Bible, the Psalms have something to offer. Whether you’re sad or happy, disappointed or angry, clear-headed or confused, the Psalms can speak to you. It is the quintessential, multi-use, multi-tasking book of the Bible. Whatever you may be wondering about that connects to God, faith or the human condition, the Psalms can help. And so... whenever Janet and I wonder about what to preach, we think about the Psalms.

It’s been a while since we’ve talked about the Psalms, and since we have this six week gap before we start next year’s theme (yet to be chosen), a little stopover in the Psalms felt like a good idea. The psalms we’ve chosen are either psalms of thanksgiving or variations on that idea. Some consider Psalm 65 to be a hymn, while others emphasize the festival aspects, but most consider it to fall in the category of a communal psalm of thanksgiving.

Before I say more about that, a few general observations about the Psalms may be in order. To begin with, the Psalms are prayers. They all address God. Some are spoken by individuals and some by the community of faith. Even when the psalmist is remembering past events, the prayer concerns the present. Something is happening in the life of the psalmist or the community that moves the person(s) to speak to God: a trial, a blessing, an event, an occasion, a doubt, a confidence, a complaint, an acknowledgement. The Psalms reflect the human attempt to understand the place of God in the life of the world.

As in any relationship between two people familiar with each other, the Psalm isn’t always explicit about the particulars that gave rise to the prayer. We don’t always know what troubles or moves the psalmist, but we do understand the feelings expressed. We know what it is to be troubled, to be moved to sorrow or joy, to be thankful or angry, to have enemies and friends. Sometimes the language makes it difficult to understand a particular psalm, but usually we have no trouble stepping into the feelings expressed in the prayer and to make it our own in our present.

We won’t be exploring the wide range of emotions present in the Psalms. Instead, we’ve chosen to focus on psalms that reflect gratitude, generally known as psalms of thanksgiving. As I already mentioned, today’s psalm is communal, a prayer spoken in the context of worship most likely, by the gathered community of faith. The assumption

of the vast majority of psalms, even in many of the prayers by individuals, is that the believer belongs to a community of believers, that there is a group with a common interest in understanding God, and a God who draws people together in a shared community.

I have some sympathy for the evangelical culture that insists that faith must be appropriated by the individual. It belongs to my history and is a large part of what makes me uncomfortable with theologians whose purpose seems to be to debunk the idea of a personal God. Despite the dangers of thinking of God as person, confusing God with a human being, it is important to think of God as someone like us, as someone with whom we can have a relationship, someone we can pray to, someone whose presence we can feel.

So without denying that faith is individual, we need to remember that not only does faith bind us to God, faith also binds us to one another. It may be that we can believe as individuals, but faith needs community behind it to be effective in the world. The Psalms assume this, and lest you think this belongs just to the Jewish world, the New Testament reinforces it from the gospel of Matthew through Revelation. Jesus, again and again, calls us into community. We practice faith together.

So let's talk about the psalm specifically. Carol Dempsey suggests that this psalm may be related to the Feast of Tabernacles, "celebrated in the early fall...." She describes it as "a joyous feast that commemorates the exodus and gives thanks for the harvest of both the threshing floor and the wine press...." As one of three pilgrimage festivals, Jews would have traveled to the temple in Jerusalem, perhaps singing this song as they approached the city. The festival "lasted seven days and concluded with a special Sabbath that afforded people a time to rest and rejoice and to eat and drink the fruits of their labor" (pp. 201, 203).

The imagery in verses 9-13 evoke the gratitude and joy of the people as they acknowledge God's watering of the fields that produce "pastures overflowing the wilderness... hills girding themselves with joy... valleys decked out with grain." We wouldn't have to know about the Festival of Tabernacles to identify with the joy held in these images. Our hearts also sing to God in the experiences where God's provision has seemed especially abundant and generous.

We have our own feasts that give rise to these same feelings: the extravagance of a Thanksgiving feast that stirs in our hearts a thankfulness for the year past, and opens our hands in a spirit of generosity to those who have struggled in the year past; a Christmas celebration that turns our thoughts to giving out of the abundance of God's grace expressed in the birth of Jesus.

Of course we don't feel this level of gratitude all the time. We come to these holy days, through a year that isn't always filled with blessings. Our journey to this joy passes through sorrow and hardship as well. The psalm acknowledges these struggles in verses 5-8. The feeling behind these verses lies, still, in the times after the hardship.

God is praised as one who delivers, presumably from some kind of trouble. God is strong like the mountains, has authority over the wild seas, overcomes the “tumult of the people,” and ushers in the new day and fills the night with joy. We haven’t arrived at the abundant harvest yet, but we are through the trouble. The community gives thanks for deliverance, perhaps recalling the Exodus. They are in the land and ready to plant the crops, an opportunity they could not have expected to see apart from the God who delivers.

Again, we don’t need to know the particulars about Israel’s deliverance, we know the feeling that arises when the troubles are over: the gratitude after the serious illness has passed, the thankfulness when recovery from the accident is complete, the restoration of peace following conflict. We can easily read our own story into this prayer, joining our gratitude to theirs for the many ways in which God walks us through troublesome times.

But we have not yet worked our way back to the trouble, the days in which gratitude gets stuck in our throats because the times are not good, the times when, as verse 3 describes them, “deeds of iniquity overwhelm us.” This isn’t how we would interpret the times of struggle. We are reluctant to blame ourselves for difficulties we face. Typically we don’t think about them this way. It sounds too much like blaming the victim, like those who thought of AIDS as God’s punishment for sinful behavior.

Several commentators suggested that the origin of this psalm may have been a time directly following a drought. The community would have seen the drought as a sign of God’s displeasure with something that they had done. They would have seen the end of the drought as a sign of God’s forgiveness. Until very recently, we would not be inclined to connect the weather with sinful behavior, but one of the tenets of climate change claims that human behaviors have directly impacted the weather systems of the earth.

We sometimes smile at the naiveté of scripture that links the troubles faced by Israel with God’s punishment for violating the covenant, but there is a profound truth behind this perhaps too literal way of interpretation. What we do matters. It impacts the world around us, and when our behavior is out of line it has a negative impact. What we do matters to the environment, and when we do harm, it harms us too. Sin does bring trouble.

But even if it didn’t, we feel it. We sometimes feel responsible for the trouble we’re in, even when we’re not to blame. Sometimes our prayers are pleas with God to show us what we must have done wrong to be afflicted like this. “Why me?” we ask. Many psalms express this anguish, but Psalm 65 is still on the other side. Its opening verses are about gratitude, a thankfulness rooted in the experience of forgiveness.

According to David Ruhe, the psalm moves from God the forgiver to God the deliverer, to God the provider. It moves “from a gratitude that is dutiful, to praise that is awe-inspired, to thanksgiving that is extravagantly beautiful” (p.204). It is not the stuff of everyday life, but it is where faith is taking us. We are moving toward ever-increasing degrees of gratitude.

We... are moving toward ever-increasing degrees of gratitude. There is no “I” in this psalm. Walter Brueggemann writes in *The Message of the Psalms*, “Psalm 65 reflects a public imagination capable of a troubled spirit, not so full of self, but able to reflect on its life in the light of the majesty of God, a community forgiven and therefore ready to begin afresh” (p.135). Artur Weiser captures the movement from beginning to end when he writes: “Thus the psalmist pictures himself as belonging to the large community of those, who, united in the confession of their sins and in their prayers for God’s forgiveness, may partake of the whole wealth of the divine goodness” (p.463).

If you’re wondering “why you should be grateful” and where that gratitude can carry you, this would be a good psalm to read again and again. Amen.

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