

God is So Good

A Starry Night

The beginning of each new year is always a time to both look forward and back, to reflect on life's highs and lows. The Psalms are uniquely designed to help us do that. Psalm 147 (and indeed the last few psalms in the psalter) comes from a happy, holy time in the city of Jerusalem, a time when the nation was looking forward in renewed hope. But it was also a time that had been *preceded* by a very long and difficult era. These city walls had been witness to horrible things. Through these Jerusalem gates, Babylonian soldiers had marched in chains long lines of the noblest of Jerusalem's citizens into exile. But now they have returned. The worst is behind them, the best is yet to come. The Jews are well into the process of rebuilding their lives.

So as we read the 147th Psalm, let us imagine a starry starry night. These ancient people we call the Jews are up late tonight, lining the ramparts of their newly refurbished city walls, staring up at the stars in the sky. They are starting to finally realize their broken hearts have at long last been truly healed. Their city and their lives have once again returned to a state of peace and order. And as their eyes gaze on the stars, their minds to another starry, starry night so long ago. For a starry sky will always take the Jew back to . . .

Father Abraham

On *that* night so long ago, God said to Abraham, "Look up! *Count the stars*, if you are able. Because that's how many descendants you are going to have." It didn't seem likely to that old man that night, but *here they are*: all children of Abraham, all here tonight under the stars.

For as preposterous as it seemed, Abraham *believed* God that starry night. And the Bible says that God accepted Abraham's heart-felt response as "*righteousness*". In other words, Abraham got the message. Abraham truly realized that this god who he had encountered had made a covenant with him and could and would do exactly what he promised. And so Abraham was *righteous* not in the sense that he was any better than the rest of us, not that he was morally or ethnically superior to anyone else, but *right* about his partnership with God as a living operative, part of God's plan to redeem "all peoples of the world." In fact God would even redeem the soil under his feet.

And we call that *faith*, and now, on this starry night, these Jewish people also realize that they too could have a genuine knowledge of God just as surely as Father Abraham. But this knowledge never comes automatically. A knowledge of God is never something that one is born with. It calls for contemplation of God's presence. A dialogue with a real person. A personal relationship. The faith commitment is a *total life* commitment one must make, and one must make it in circumstances beyond one's own control. Otherwise it isn't faith. But once one has it, this knowledge of God is something no foreign army can ever take away. But nor can any power or ability of our own ever calculate and conjure it up.

It just has to happen as we contemplate a God who promises us

Steadfast Love

In the words of this Psalm, "The Lord takes pleasure in those who fear him, in those who *hope* in his *steadfast love*."

Tonight, as a generation of returned exiles stand on the ramparts of the city, as they look out at thriving fields and vineyards that now surround their city, at distant campfires where

shepherds watch their flocks in peace, as they hear the hooting owls hunting freely in the orchards, they can lift up thankful hearts and say that God is so good. So from the walls of Jerusalem tonight we can hear . . .

The call to prayer

12 “Praise the Lord, O Jerusalem! Praise your God, O Zion!

The Hebrew words used here have come *untranslated* into English fused together into one word *Hallelujah*. Halal - praise, Jah - the Lord.

We use it rather freely as in:

“Did you pick up the mail?”

“Yeah, your income tax return finally arrived.”

“Well, *Hallelujah!*”

We use it in contemporary Christian music, so often that “Hallelujah” could often be easily substituted for “Yippy, Ei O Ky Eh” or “shooby dooby do”, without substantially altering the intent of the song. Suffice it to say that this word *hallelujah* can be, at least by some Christians overused and undervalued.

In the Psalms of Israel, Praise the Lord or Hallelujah is a call to prayer. It is a *solemn summons* to have a fresh encounter with the living God. It is the call to enter into communion.

Yet even in ancient Israel, there arose a similar problem to the one we have in our own day: The further in time the people of Israel moved away from the critical events that shaped their history, the events that really brought them to their knees, those times when God had acted in power and saving grace, the further away in time the generations got from such events as the Exodus or later the exile, the more *secure* they became, the more *settled* in their situation, the more comfortable in their religious routines, *the more they began to lose their grip on the reasons they were summoned to praise their god in the first place.*

Ironically, it was *security* and not *threat* that began to erode the foundations of their faith. Perhaps this is a principle of human history: The more peace and security we know, the less we deeply we heed the call to prayer. This, is what we might call . . .

The problem of thickened borders

Verse 13-14 “For he strengthens the bars of your gates; he blesses your children within you. He grants peace within your borders; he fills you with the finest of wheat.”

As the people Jerusalem grew more secure, they must never forget that they were once victims of oppression in desperate need of liberation. They were once not free. The compassionate society they now enjoy in which one can walk the streets without fear must be cherished as a gift from Almighty God. But this is not a gift for them alone. It is God’s will for all people.

The Holy City over which this psalmist says God takes special care is, still to this day, the most fought over city in the world. It is the centre of a region in which even the ordinary and normal distribution of foodstuffs and basic amenities is actually abnormal and extraordinary. A place where violence and warfare are the norm, a city divided by a wall. This is the problem of thickened borders.

Over Christmas we witnessed another attempted terrorist attack on an airplane. And the response, of course, has been to search and screen every airline passenger even more thoroughly. The “free world” has become less and less free. The response to these threats always seems to be

to “strengthen the bars of our gates.” Thicken our borders. Build walls. Set up checkpoints.

But there’s a *problem* with the thickening of borders. Thickened borders never deal with the *root* of hostilities within the human community. So what *will* make for the “peace on earth good will towards men”? What will move the world towards what the Christmas angels declared at Jesus birth? Tighter security? High tech equipment? Is that what we need?

What Jesus brought to earth is a kingdom that knows no earthly borders. It’s a kingdom the security of which comes from God’s Spirit creating trust and removing fear and bringing justice into people’s lives. It’s not just another alternative to the present worldly powers whereby the underdogs seize the thrones of power and eventually become the oppressors themselves. The Gospel works at a level which eventually makes borders unnecessary. Justice, mercy, and compassion are more than mere words. They must become embodied by real people.

But the church can make two wrong turns that can actually thicken the borders. One is to simply do humanitarian work with without sharing the Gospel story. That will lead to failure in the mission of the church. But so also a programme of evangelism without a genuine embodiment of the kingdom in the lives of people. But what we have working for us as Christian witnesses wherever we go in this world, the thing that gives us hope, is the fact that . .

God is already at work.

15-18 He sends out his command to the earth; his word runs swiftly. He gives snow like wool; he scatters frost like ashes. He hurls down hail like crumbs—who can stand before his cold? He sends out his word, and melts them; he makes his wind blow, and the waters flow.

As a year end report, the chief meteorologist of Environment Canada was listing the 10 top weather stories of 2009: extreme weather, the summer that never arrived, fires, hailstorms . . . One man whose new house in suburban Toronto had been destroyed by a tornado last summer described watching his roof vanish and seen all his furniture, chairs, couch everything, disappear into the sky. He commented that he will never see nature the same way again. The total awesome power. It changed his life. This awesome power is what the psalmist sees in the hands of God. God doesn’t start his work the moment we show up. He’s already there.

Perhaps we in the church should not speak of having a “mandate” or a “commission” as we go into the world. That kind of language implies that we, by our own efforts must impose something on the world. That we can somehow stir up the tornado that transforms peoples lives. But isn’t it true that what we are simply called to do is bear witness to what God has already done in the birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus? God is already at work in our world, and it is through these central events revolving around Jesus that we can explain and make sense of our world.

This may come as an unwelcome message and even be met with hostility. It is after all a challenge to the powers that rule. But sometimes when the awesome power of God is revealed in nature, people may, perhaps for the first time, be open to . . .

The revelation given to the chosen people

19, 20 He declares his word to Jacob, his statutes and ordinances to Israel. He has not dealt thus with any other nation; they do not know his ordinances. Praise the Lord! “

One of the great stumbling blocks to the modern mind is God’s election of a chosen people. How can that be? It offends the modern idea of fairness that one people might be chosen by God above all others to bear God’s salvation message to the world. Why doesn’t God just

reveal himself to everyone, once for all? Rip the sky open and say, Here I am!?”?

But there is a logic to it. The invisible God gave his word to the chosen people. But they have much more than merely a book. The Torah of Moses is an *incarnation* of God’s special will and was only given to Israel. In Psalm 147, it is God’s word that is described as having the ultimate transforming power.

But while Israel is *chosen*, by God, above all other nations, they have never had a place of *privilege*. The great Jewish rabbi of the 20th century Martin Buber, who lived through the holocaust era said that the no one experiences more intensely than the Jew the *unredeemed* nature of the world.

The logic of God’s election of a chosen people to have a revelation of him that others do not have, lies in the love and patience of God who is, in our day, giving the world time to repent and believe before the great and awful day of his coming. For one day God *will* reveal himself to the world. Jesus will come again. His kingdom will extend to the full creation. All will be made new. And so this psalm leads today, through time to . . .

Another starry night

Tonight, under these same Jerusalem skies, Magi from the East are making their way to find the Christ. John’s Gospel tells us that in Jesus, the Word was made flesh. By the light of a *star* the Magi found, in Bethlehem, “the true light that lights every human being that comes into this world”. Then John’s Gospel makes this statement:

“The Law was indeed given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.” (1:17)

The ancient rabbis spoke of Moses as the “*First redeemer*”, in other words the one who led the Exodus, the one who brought the Torah down from the mountain as a gift, not a burden. But the rabbis awaited the “*Second redeemer*.” According to John, the Messiah brought a revelation of God and an experience of salvation characterized by “grace and truth”. Jesus, the Word made flesh brought the earlier revelation to its ultimate fulfillment; the *second* Exodus led by Christ brought people into a new creation – the eternal kingdom of God.

And it is by the light of this same star – the spiritual light – that comes to us in this bread and cup at this table today that we can come to God. This same Jesus Christ brings his grace and truth to us.

The same starry sky that guided the Magi is our invitation to continue . . .

The Journey to God

A few years ago when I bought my Merrell hiking boots (which I happen to be wearing as I speak) there was a small tag attached to the laces on which the Merrell Boot Co. states its mission:

“Merrell is dedicated to the outdoor journey of discovery –the search for self-knowledge, meaning, friendship, and fulfilment that links the world’s people who enjoy the outdoors. Whether born on the mountain or raised in the city, enjoyment of the outdoors is independent of age, income, occupation or culture. The outdoors re-energizes, restores, illuminates . . .and clarifies what is important to us all.”

Now that struck me as a pretty profound statement to attach to a pair of boots. So much so, that, at the risk of being repetitive, with very few modifications, it can be our stated purpose for being at the Lord’s Table today.

So try these boots on for size:

“[The church] is dedicated to the journey to God - a journey of discovery –the search for self-knowledge, meaning, friendship, and fulfilment that links the world’s people who enjoy the presence of God. Whether born on the mountain or raised in the city, enjoyment of the presence of God is independent of age, income, occupation or culture. The journey to God re-energizes, restores, illuminates . . .and clarifies what is important to us all.”

It’s by the light of this star that we can make this journey knowing that God is so good.