

The Sunday Missive – February 25, 2024 The Second Sunday in Lent

Hymn 484 Praise the Lord through every nation

Praise the Lord through every nation;
His holy arm hath wrought salvation;
Exalt him on his Father's throne.
Praise your King, ye Christian legions,
Who now prepares in heavenly regions
Unfailing mansions for his own:
With voice and minstrelsy extol his majesty: Alleluia!
His praise shall sound all nature round,
And hymns on every tongue abound.

Jesus, Lord, our Captain glorious,
O'er sin, and death, and hell victorious,
Wisdom and might to thee belong:
We confess, proclaim, adore thee;
We bow the knee, we fall before thee;
Thy love henceforth shall be our song.
The cross meanwhile we bear, the crown ere-long to wear: Alleluia!
Thy reign extend world without end;
Let praise from all to thee ascend.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GZfzeonjJcc>

The Collect of the Day

O God, whose glory it is always to have mercy: Be gracious to all who have gone astray from your ways, and bring them again with penitent hearts and steadfast faith to embrace and hold fast the unchangeable truth of your Word, Jesus Christ your Son; who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to Abram, and said to him, "I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous." Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him, "As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you.

God said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her."

Psalm 22

Praise the Lord, you that fear God* ***Stand in awe all you of Jacob's line, and give glory.***

For God does not despise the poor* ***But when they cry, God hears them.***

My praise is of the Lord in the great assembly* ***I will perform my vows in the presence of those who worship God.***

25 The poor shall eat and be satisfied* ***And all those who seek the Lord shall sing "May your heart live for ever!"***

All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord* ***All the families of the nations shall bow before God.***

For kingship belongs to the Lord* ***Who rules over the nations.***

To God alone all who sleep in the earth bow down* ***All who go down to the dust fall before the Lord.***

My soul shall live for the Lord; my descendants shall serve God* ***They shall be known as the Lord's for ever.***

They shall make known to peoples yet unborn* ***The saving deeds that God has done.***

Romans 4:13-25

For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith. If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation.

For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us, as it is written, "I have made you the father of many nations") —in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become "the father of many nations," according to what was said, "So numerous shall your descendants be." He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already as good as dead (for he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. Therefore his faith "was reckoned to him as righteousness." Now the words, "it was reckoned to him," were written not for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification.

Hymn 752 There's a sweet, sweet spirit in this place

There's a sweet, sweet Spirit in this place,
And I know that it's the Spirit of the Lord;
There are sweet expressions on each face,
And I know they feel the presence of the Lord.

Refrain:

Sweet Holy Spirit, Sweet heavenly Dove,
Stay right here with us, filling us with Your love.
And for these blessings we lift our hearts in praise;
Without a doubt we'll know that we have been revived,
When we shall leave this place.

There are blessings you cannot receive
Till you know Him in His fullness and believe;
You're the one to profit when you say,
"I am going to walk with Jesus all the way."

If you say He saved you from your sin,
Now you're weak, you're bound and cannot enter in,
You can make it right if you will yield,
You'll enjoy the Holy Spirit that we feel.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-9EGwkimNeQ>

Gospel Mark 8:31-38

Jesus began to teach his disciples that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it,

and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”

Not a Bit More; Not a Bit Less Lent 2B

I the Lord thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me. Yes, and the Lord is still a jealous god -- if, by jealous we mean strict – and if, by hate, we mean disobey. So whoever hates God – or, let us say, whoever hates that which is godly -- according to the threat in Exodus, will bring punishment upon unborn offspring they will never even meet. In other words, when we -- as individuals, as communities, as institutions, as nations – if we persist in ungodly behaviors – from small shenanigans to abusive policies and practices, to defiant ignorance of clear and pressing global issues – we are inflicting direct, unfeeling and brutal harm upon our offspring yet unborn. In pointing this out, there’s no exaggeration in saying that ole Moses and his later chroniclers were way ahead of their time.

When we look at the ten commandments, we can’t help but notice that half of them have to do with God’s jealousy and the other half with ours. On the spiritual plane, the cosmic reality that is benevolent Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer insists that we acknowledge its singularity (there’s only one reality), that we not pretend otherwise, that on a regular basis, we stop whatever we’re doing to rest in this truth, that we never seek to coopt it for selfish desires, and that we take care of our parents as best we can. Anything else, and the aforementioned multi-generational disasters are the result. We can call these God’s jealous rules, or simply recognize them as the cold light of reality but the result is the same.

And on the physical plane, God knows we do what we know is wrong in the attempt to make or keep the world the way we want it. For us, that amounts to killing, lying, stealing, breaking promises and being

envious. We are angry and we misbehave when the world isn't the way we want it. Last week we had a chance to hear again the story of God overdoing the anger thing -- drowning almost everybody --overdoing it so much that he had to go on the (no-more-water) wagon -- make the pledge-- swear off deluging...for good. Now we say we are made in the image and likeness of this God, so it stands to reason that we would do well to take a very close look at our jealous anger too, wherever it may be hiding, and wherever it may be directed. As the sayings go, jealousy is a green-eyed monster; self-righteous anger is a luxury we cannot afford. It's destructive, dangerous, deleterious.

And yet our scriptural history is full of God's anger, at us and at others. Again and again, people in the Bible are threatened and stricken, smitten and destroyed in and we are stuck with trying to make sense of it. Of course, part of the answer is that "Judgement belongs to the Lord." So, if God is angry at somebody, there must be a good reason, they must deserve it, and our big priority in life should be to not be like them. We get that.

But we all have anger in us, from the moment of birth, when we are rudely expelled or yanked out of a perfect environment, Mom's tummy, where all our desires are fulfilled and all our needs met instantly, and anything we don't get that we might like doesn't matter because we don't know about it. Suddenly everybody starts withholding food from us and leaving us in our tangled bedclothes and messy diapers for what seems like ever. We are angry! Look at the face of a crying baby if you don't believe me; the younger, the angrier. Those newborns -- first the lip comes out, then the eyes screw shut and the mouth goes wide and it's pure rage -- out...rage! Especially when they start shaking, juddering with it. Our whole lives sometimes seem to be an exercise in anger management from the start.

So, we look closely at God's example and make of it what we can. Because our salvation history, as chronicled in the scriptures, is really a history of God's attempts at anger management. Every parent knows that telling your kids, "Do what I say, not what I do" is about as effective as the US telling other countries to disarm. It's just not going to happen. In the stories, we see God act angrily, and we at least

consider acting angrily ourselves. To escape, we have to look deeper, at how God develops, at whom God becomes, despite the anger.

God has a picture of a perfect world, just like we do. And when humankind develops oh so imperfectly, God is oh so disappointed. There is only one attribute of God that can overpower the anger, and that is the love, love that comes to life as benefit of the doubt, forgiveness, new beginnings, leeway. Perhaps that will have to be our antidote too. Eve and Adam and Cain had to live outside the garden after their sins, but they are not destroyed. Noah was a pretty unsavory fellow by any standards, boat or no boat, but God stayed with him. Likewise, Jacob and David and many others. These are our spiritual ancestors; in a real sense, they are us. And God stuck with them, steadily moving away from threats and acts of violent rage towards forgiveness, encouragement and loving example, culminating in the life of Christ. Most of us look pretty good by comparison with these characters, sin-wise. God will stick with us too.

What can we make of Abraham? Some of the scams he got up to are enough to curl your hair if it isn't already, straighten it out if it is. Lying about his marriage in order to save his own skin -- twice? Taking his son up a mountain to kill because he thinks God wants him to? Agreeing to impregnate his wife's slave? We know that Abraham's offspring by Hagar the slave are not one tiny bit less valuable to God than the ones who came by Sarah, but Hagar and her son are just discarded by their owners. Surely God could have found a more virtuous guy in Chaldea, or at least in the near suburbs, than him. What could God have been thinking?

But what if God wasn't thinking? What if God picked Abraham at random? Out of a turban, so to speak? After all, this is the way we ourselves are picked, two gametes among many find each other to make a zygote. What if this whole story is about God's experiment on God's self-imaged created, whoever they may be? "What will happen," God asks, "If I take no unilateral action to change these people except give them faith, faith enough to become willing, to involve themselves, flaws and all, in my agenda? It may be messy, but it may just work. And Oh! what a thing it would be to have the experiment work; because if Sarah and Abraham can do it, anybody can!"

So, God started to work on them, gave them a load of faith to go with their many character flaws, made them a permanent promise, a covenant that continues true to this day. It was messy then. It still is messy now. Because Sarah and Abraham and Hagar are still us. And the children of Hagar and the children of Sarah are still around. And all of them, all of us have flaws, jealousy, anger, rationalizations. And each of us has equal access to forgiveness, the benefit of the doubt and encouragement if only we will listen to God and learn.

Each of us has access to the cure if only we will accept it. Each of us has the same potential for offspring more numerous than the stars, as loving acts multiply from ours. It is a potential just as wondrous and inexplicable as Sarah's and Hagar's and Abraham's. Not a bit more. Not a bit less.

Hymn 637 How firm a foundation

How firm a foundation, ye saints of the Lord,
Is laid for your faith in his excellent word!
What more can he say than to you he hath said,
To you that for refuge to Jesus have fled?

"When through the deep waters I call thee to go,
The rivers of woe shall not thee overflow;
For I will be with thee, thy troubles to bless,
And sanctify to thee thy deepest distress.

"When through fiery trials thy pathway shall lie,
My grace, all sufficient, shall be thy supply;
The flame shall not hurt thee; I only design
Thy dross to consume, and thy gold to refine.

"The soul that to Jesus hath fled for repose,
I will not, I will not desert to its foes;
That soul, though all hell shall endeavor to shake,
I'll never, no, never, no, never forsake."

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dx4eIr4x5yo>

Flame-Heart

So much have I forgotten in ten years,
So much in ten brief years; I have forgot
What time the purple apples come to juice
And what month brings the shy forget-me-not;
Forgotten is the special, startling season
Of some beloved tree's flowering and fruiting,
What time of year the ground doves brown the fields
And fill the noonday with their curious fluting:
I have forgotten much, but still remember
The poinsettia's red, blood-red in warm December.

I still recall the honey-fever grass,
But I cannot bring back to mind just when
We rooted them out of the ping-wing path
To stop the mad bees in the rabbit pen.
I often try to think in what sweet month
The languid painted ladies used to dapple
The yellow bye road mazing from the main,
Sweet with the golden threads of the rose-apple:
I have forgotten, strange, but quite remember
The poinsettia's red, blood-red in warm December.

What weeks, what months, what time o' the mild year
We cheated school to have our fling at tops?
What days our wine-thrilled bodies pulsed with joy
Feasting upon blackberries in the copse?
Oh, some I know! I have embalmed the days,
Even the sacred moments, when we played,
All innocent of passion uncorrupt.
At noon and evening in the flame-heart's shade:
We were so happy, happy,—I remember
Beneath the poinsettia's red in warm December.

Claude McKay