

“Proclaim his salvation day after day”

Reflection 3 in the series “Salvation: The Quest”

Sing to the Lord a new song;
sing to the Lord, all the earth.
Sing to the Lord, praise his name;
proclaim his salvation day after day.
Declare his glory among the nations,
his marvelous deeds among all peoples.

So Psalm 96 begins with this sense of astonishing good news, of good news that has to be shared, that can't be kept quiet, that can't be kept to oneself. And that is what we know too, or could know if we would just stop and look and see. Everyone knows this. God is good. His deeds are marvelous. If you somehow see it otherwise you've been misled by churchmen who use the specter of God as the dark Lord to keep their followers in line. You've been misled by centuries of dark thought about God.

The goodness of God and how marvelous are his deeds are transparent to all who give it any real thought. On this *The Qur'an* asks the right question: “Oh, O human being, what has deceived you about your generous Lord?” (Sura 82). And that's it. That's the timeless, universal question: What has deceived you about your generous Lord? Because with regard to God, it's all good. And so the Psalmist goes on (Psalm 96:7-13):

Ascribe to the Lord, O families of nations,
ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.
Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name;
bring an offering and come into his courts.
Worship the Lord in the splendor of his holiness,
[in the beauty of holiness];
tremble before him, all the earth.

Say among the nations, “The Lord reigns.”
The world is firmly established, it cannot be moved;
he will judge the peoples with equity.
Let the heavens rejoice, let the earth be glad;
let the sea resound, and all that is in it;
let the fields be jubilant, and everything in them.
Then all the trees of the forest will sing for joy;
they will sing before the Lord, for he comes,
he comes to judge the earth.
He will judge the world in righteousness
and the peoples in his truth.

So we can picture a vast crowd of fifth-century worshippers reciting this Psalm in the temple at Jerusalem at one of the great annual festivals of the Jewish year. They are only

a generation or two removed from their own dark night of Babylonian exile. There they are, the young and old, the able and the disabled, those who have been successful in their affairs and those who come deeply conscious of their own failures. There are those who are genuinely religious absorbed by everything that's happening around them, and there are those who are distracted and preoccupied by other matters, at first only going through the motions. There are those from Jerusalem who take much of this for granted. There are those from the countryside, from remote farms, maybe even from distant lands, fascinated by everything they see and hear and smell.

But slowly through the music of this psalm, by its antiphonal give-and-take, call-and-response, and by the surge of the trained singers and their instruments, by the beat of cymbals and drums, by the haunting beauty of the harp and the lyre, by the blast of the trumpets and ram's horns, the great assembly comes together singing a new song, proclaiming the Lord's salvation, declaring his glory, asserting, "The Lord reigns." And it's as if the heavens and earth join in, the sea resounds, the fields are jubilant, and the very trees of the forest also sing for joy.

The people sing of a God who makes all things new, who not only creates but keeps on recreating, so each new day calls forth a new song. They summon the family of nations, all the earth, to sing to the Lord, not just as individuals mired in their own self-centered concerns, not just as individuals mired in their own self-centered ideas of salvation, but everyone, all the earth, the family of nations. They call on everyone to turn from the stuff of their lives, from concerns about this or that, from worry about crops or fields, or houses, or even families, from affairs of the heart, even from their own spiritual struggles, from all the things, all the people, all the circumstances, that will inevitably disappoint them, to proclaim, to shout, to declare emphatically, "The Lord reigns."

They picture what they know to be splendid, or majestic, or strong, or glorious but now they envision the God who gives what is splendid its splendor, who gives what is majestic its majesty, who gives what is strong its strength, who gives what is glorious its glory. And now they worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness, discovering in the here and now the rapturous joy of experiencing God: of sensing the divine flow all around them and now in them, of feeling their oneness with the God of all the families of nations, discovering in the here and now the rapturous joy of giving to God the very best they have, their finest offerings, their best selves, their greatest artistic gifts.

It's an amazing picture. And it calls us to turn from all the stuff of our lives, this worry, that complaint, to turn from the places we're stuck, from the preoccupations of our time, from political craziness and obsession with sports and matters of lifestyle, from all the things, and all the people, and all the circumstances, that will inevitably disappoint us – to turn from all that and proclaim, "The Lord reigns."

And maybe I should end with this, but then there is the matter of a place like Auschwitz. In the fall of 2013 Debbie and I visited the death camp of Auschwitz in Poland. It was ironically an amazingly beautiful day. There had been early-morning mist and low-lying fog as we left Krakow, but by time we reached Auschwitz-Birkenau, the sun shone

radiantly in a cloudless blue sky, what we in America now know as a 9/11 sky. I thought I was prepared for what we would see at Auschwitz. What I was not prepared for was the cloudless blue sky. And under that sky it was hard at first to imagine the horrors that went on in death camps. But slowly the evidence gets through to you: the suitcases left behind, the piles of eyeglasses, the mounds of human hair, the collection of toddlers' clothing, the interrogation cells, the hard, wooden sleeping platforms where people shivered through cold Polish nights, the side railing where freight trains from all over Europe disgorged their living and their dead and where families were torn apart without mercy, husbands from wives, parents from children. And of course the crematoria.

I'm still processing what we saw there. How can the Psalmist be right? How? The Lord reigns? But remember the Psalmist is likely fifth-century BC. Holocaust is in his memory too. He's not all that far removed from his own great national trauma, repeated sieges of Jerusalem, the sons of the king killed before the king's eyes who was then blinded, the death marches to Babylon, the decades of exile there. And still he composes this psalm. In the end, he concludes, "The Lord reigns. He will judge the peoples with equity. The Lord comes, he comes to judge the earth."

In fact, this is all part of the good news. It is for this reason that the fields are jubilant, that the trees of the forest sing for joy. Here's the point: What just might have happened if this Psalmist 2500 years before Auschwitz had been heard? What would have happened if the families of nations had learned to sing to the Lord a new song? If the families of nations had learned to ascribe to the Lord glory and strength? If the families of nations had learned to worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness? If the families of nations had learned that the Lord reigns? What would have happened then when twisted, hate-filled charismatic leaders sought to lead their nations to the deadly beat of a dark lord created out of their own demented imaginations? Madmen would have been seen as madmen. Prophets of hate would have been seen as prophets of hate. There would have been no Auschwitz.

Or consider our own lives. When trouble comes, sometimes through no fault of our own but sometimes as a natural consequence of what we have done or have not done, what would have happened if with each new day we had always been singing to the Lord a new song, if we had proclaimed the Lord's salvation day after day, if we had continually ascribed to the Lord splendor and majesty, and strength and glory, if we had always understood that no matter what happens, in good times and in bad, the Lord reigns?

To this we are called. This is our destiny: One day the families of nations – all the earth – joining all creation in joy, in jubilation, as different as we all may be, drawn together, singing to the Lord a new song, ascribing to the Lord splendor and majesty, and strength and glory, understanding that we do not reign. None of us. Ever. Not really. It is the Lord who reigns.

– Dale Pauls