

May 16, 2010

Psalm 97

1 The Lord is king! Let the earth rejoice;
let the many coastlands be glad!

2 Clouds and thick darkness are all around him;
righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne.

3 Fire goes before him,
and consumes his adversaries on every side.

4 His lightnings light up the world;
the earth sees and trembles.

5 The mountains melt like wax before the Lord,
before the Lord of all the earth.

6 The heavens proclaim his righteousness;
and all the peoples behold his glory.

7 All worshipers of images are put to shame,
those who make their boast in worthless idols;
all gods bow down before him.

8 Zion hears and is glad,
and the towns of Judah rejoice,
because of your judgments, O God.

9 For you, O Lord, *are most high over all the earth*;
you are exalted far above *all* gods.

10 The Lord loves those who hate evil;
he guards the lives of his faithful;
he rescues them from the hand of the wicked.

11 Light dawns for the righteous,
and joy for the upright in heart.

12 Rejoice in the Lord, O you righteous,
and give thanks to his holy name!

+ + +

You've seen it a thousand times, a softball player knocks one out of the park; you'll see it as she rounds third. Or maybe a wide receiver catches a pass for a touchdown; you'll see it as he crosses the goal line. It doesn't matter if it's the best team in the state or the worst team in the state-- the arm goes up, hand stretched out, index finger extended and we all know it means that, "We're number one!"

It's a great sentiment, but I have to admit I've grown weary of it. Besides, I'm not absolutely certain that when the player holds that index finger up there that he's talking about his team. I'm thinking that he's talking about himself, like he's number one; come on! It's his job to catch the football when did doing your job make anybody number one?

I was introduced to the idea of "number one" as a small boy in the early fifties while my dad was assigned to Japan. Seventeen years later in the same part of the world, I learned about it all over again, except I also learned that number one had an opposite number and that number was ten. If something or someone was number one we were

discussing the best; but if it was number 10, we were discussing the worst.

This psalm makes me think of that “number one” business. And there is more than a hint about number ten in it as well. The God of this particular poet, the poet who wrote the psalm we call 97, believed that *his* God is number one. How do we know that, because we can easily recall the opening sentence of the poem, “The Lord is king! Let the earth rejoice; let the many coastlands be glad!”

Now that is a powerful statement, especially when we think about what he might have called king. For example, he might have called Israel king, but more likely he might have called his tribe king and since he was living in or around Jerusalem as attested in verse 8, “Zion,” (nearly synonymous with Jerusalem) “Zion hears and is glad, and the towns of Judah rejoice, because of your judgments, O God.”

So don't be too surprised but this particular psalmist or poet strikes me as the guy “rounding third,” and, as Joe Nuxhall used to say, “headed for home,” with that index finger pointed to the sky. “My God is number one!” he exclaimed.

Well how does he know? Just like the ball player who hit the homer, I want to scream, hey, kid, the game ain't over yet. How can you say you're number one when you might not even win this game?

Same for the Psalmist.

Besides this whole ‘my God is better than your God’ has caused more trouble, more loss of life, more damage than anything else I can think of. And what's the point? Is their god and ours supposed to meet in the back yard for ten rounds of boxing to prove which is greater? God's don't normally work like that, but we do, and maybe we're just looking for an excuse to do something mean to somebody we don't particularly care for and, imagine-- we have been taught this all our lives. We believe that people who don't believe the same way we do are going to spend eternity in a very bad place; and what is worse, they believe the same about us!

It's way past time for both us and them to lay that aside. Can't we both love God without condemning someone else's god or announcing that they are doomed? Do we really believe they are just because our Bible says so about them? And remember that oftentimes they are no better because their holy writings say the same thing about us.

But having said that let's review that first verse again. It sounds simple enough, “The Lord is king! Let the earth rejoice; let the many coastlands be glad!” But we are tripped up again with little words. For example the poet believed that his God was above all other gods. What I am saying is that God is above all other gods including ours and including his. God is above all other gods including your god and my god. Now that's a stretch across twenty-five centuries and before you brand me a heretic, let's give the assertion some thought.

Maybe the god we worship is not number one. Maybe nobody's god is number one until

we admit that the God of gods is the real number one and perhaps the poet got it right when he said in verse 7, "All worshipers of images are put to shame, those who make their boast in worthless idols; *all gods* bow down before him." It was meditating on that verse that moved me into the place where we can affirm that there is one God who is beyond our understanding and who is free to reveal himself to this or any other world in whatever way he chooses-- and still be God.

So here on earth we find a nomadic group of tribes wandering around four thousand years ago, really just the blink of an eye when we consider the age of the planet. These Habiru who will one day be called Hebrew and later on Jews believed in one God-- a unique position based on the early and faulty revelation that this one God chose the Habiru out of all the people on earth including those known to the Habiru and those unknown. And not only that-- he promised them a portion of that planet to call there own-- but failed to mention any of that to the people who were already living there, so the Habiru, now called the Hebrews had to fight to claim the land they believed God had promised them. But like I said, the people who were already living there believed that their gods had promised the same land to them and so they fought to keep it, to throw the Hebrew invaders out.

Who was right? Well somebody once said, I think it was Machievelli, that "History is a tale told by the victor." And just about every religion that has survived, and by surviving-- won makes the same assertions that Christianity does, that our religion is the only one that guarantees meaning, that promises an afterlife for those who believe. Meanwhile the argument goes on, "Oh no you don't!" "Oh yes we do!" And woe be unto the one who suggests that by competing in our claims that God loves us best, we are both wrong. And God weeps.

No doubt either Patti or I have told some of you this story before, but not everybody has heard it, so those of you who have, be patient! In the early eighties the church I served sponsored a Laotian family-- there were very few, if any, strings attached. We made it plain to them that they had no obligation to us, that we were there to assist them appropriately and in whatever way we could get used to living in the USA which was different from living in Laos and different from living in the refugee camp in Thailand. But they chose to come to worship on Sunday even though they were not Christians. Perhaps because they were not Christian, or maybe because we were trying to be polite, we did not encourage them to participate in things like communion.

Like here we celebrated communion once a month. A few months after they had arrived, I noticed that on a month we celebrated communion by intinction that "our" Laotian family came forward to receive the elements. Maybe that's when I realized they had been doing it all along. Patti told me later that she had asked our Buddhist friends why they had participated, had anyone forced them? The woman's reply, a woman I might add who was barely out of her teens, was, "same God."

I believe she was right.

Don't worry, I'm a Christian. I know I'm a sinner and believe in the grace of God that

promises wonderful things. I cannot accept that there is no afterlife, not just because of numerous near death experiences of others where such was revealed to them-- but because I cannot accept the meaninglessness of life without some future hope. I know that's debatable, and that there is no proof, but I revel in the fact that Christianity is not about facts, but about faith, and a faith that is far more difficult for us than what we find in the Bible-- because we are asked to believe not because we saw the dead raised, the lame healed, the five thousand fed, or Jesus walking on the water. Our miracles are far more mundane. You know my favorite one: that any of us are here today.

I wish everybody all over the world believed that too, and that we could all respect the God of other religions because that God, or those gods are our God too. Have you noticed that people all over the world don't speak the same language, wear the same kinds of clothes, eat the same foods? But Joseph Campbell the great student of culture and stories told us many years ago that we all have the same stories, different characters for sure; one God or many gods, but the stories are the same.

When will we get past the childish option that our God can whip your God; or our God promises salvation and what-- your god doesn't? What is any religion that does not offer hope?

And all I am left with is did this sermon need to be preached? Did you already get it? Or am I terribly wrong? Maybe I did need to preach the truth of the Psalm that sort of -- maybe-- leaked out despite the poet's intent that, "The Lord is king! Let the earth rejoice; let the many coastlands be glad!

But not just *our* King and not just our God defined by our doctrines and dogma.

Let us pray.