

NOT WE OURSELVES

Psalm 100

A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward on the First Sunday in Lent, February 18, 2018, as part of a Lenten sermon series on Leonard Bernstein's Chichester Psalms, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.

Focus Passage

Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth.

*Worship the Lord with gladness;
come into his presence with singing.*

Know that the Lord is God.

*It is he that made us, and we are his;
we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.*

*Enter his gates with thanksgiving,
and his courts with praise.*

Give thanks to him, bless his name.

For the Lord is good;

*his steadfast love endures for ever,
and his faithfulness to all generations.*

This year under the leadership of Ben Hutchens and our Westminster Choir, we prepare for the resurrection by spending five Sundays with choral settings of psalms by the American composer Leonard Bernstein, commissioned for a festival at Chichester Cathedral in England in 1965.

- On March 4th, the Adult Choir of St. Andrew's Episcopal Church in Burke will join our choir to present all five psalms in our 11:00 a.m. service.
- The following Sunday, the two choirs will lead the service at St. Andrew's.
- In addition, during Lent, Patrick, Whitney, and I will preach on the psalm to be presented that particular Sunday.

I hope you will attend throughout this season, both to prepare for Easter and to experience a measure of continuity in your faith even as continuity seems elusive in our world.

Let us pray: *Our God, we do make a joyful noise. We do come into your presence with singing. We do enter your gates with thanksgiving. We pray that our worship will bring you a measure of the joy in receiving it that we experience in offering it. In the name of Christ. Amen.*

I.

I must have had to memorize Psalm 100 in Sunday School or confirmation, for it comes more easily to my lips than most any other psalm.

*Make a joyful noise unto the Lord,
All ye lands.
Serve the Lord with gladness,
Come before his presence with singing.*

When Patrick, Whitney and I signed up to preach the psalms in this series, I was glad Psalm 100 fell to me. It is an enormously positive and hopeful psalm.

- Its five verses contain seven *imperative* verbs, verbs of command:
 - *Make* a joyful noise
 - *Worship* the Lord with gladness
 - *Come* into his presence with singing
 - *Know* that the Lord is God
 - *Enter* his gates with thanksgiving
 - *Give* thanks to him
 - *Bless* his name.
- Each imperative then leads to brief *indicative* statements about the nature of God:
 - It is he that *made* us, and we are *his*;
 - We are *his* people, and the sheep of his pasture.
 - The Lord is *good*;
 - His steadfast love *endures* for ever,
 - His faithfulness to *all* generations.

Who can ask for more hope, more joy, more enthusiasm, more gratitude, more positive affirmation, more appealing characteristics attributed to God than those found in these five verses?

II.

But I also knew when I selected Psalm 100 I would use for the title of the sermon a phrase I remembered in it that was less ringing than the overall mood of the psalm.

The phrase is not in the version of the Bible in our pews, nor in the words our choir sang this morning. The translation we have heard today reads:

It is he that made us, and we are his.

The translation I learned as a child (from the King James Version) reads:

It is he that made us, not we ourselves.

The phrase in question contains the only *negative* word in the psalm: “*not* we ourselves.” It appears in a translation note in our pew Bibles as an alternate reading. Though my Hebrew is rusty, my understanding is that one Hebrew letter determines how the phrase is translated. If the letter was appears in the ancient manuscript being translated, the verse reads “not we ourselves.” If it doesn’t appear in the manuscript, the verse reads “we are his.”¹

Thus, when giving thanks to God for having “made us,” for our being accepted as “his people” and his serving as “our shepherd,” for his “goodness,” his “steadfast love” that “endures” for ever, and his “faithfulness to all generations,” what does it mean that after we proclaim “It is he that made us,” we add “*and not we ourselves*”? What does this sudden appearance of a negative phrase, this note of caution based on one Hebrew letter, say about our faith? Why does the psalm take this slight dip in mood toward human limitation?

III.

I had originally envisioned taking off from the celebratory nature of Psalm 100 to remind ourselves of the many blessings in human history that have developed over the past decades, indeed over the past several centuries. Listen to some of the statistics of progress that Nicholas Kristof of *The New York Times*² and Steven Pinker³ of Harvard have been citing recently:

- [In 2017], a smaller share of the world’s people were hungry, impoverished or illiterate than *at any time* before in human history.
- A smaller proportion of children died than *ever* before.
- *Every day...*
 - The number of people around the world living in extreme poverty goes down by 217,000
 - 325,000 more people gain access to electricity
 - And 300,000 more, to clean drinking water.

[Kristof adds]:

- As recently as the *1960s*, a *majority* of humans had always been illiterate and lived in extreme poverty.
- *Now* fewer than 15 percent are illiterate, and fewer than 10 percent live in extreme poverty.

Steven Pinker adds:

¹ Robert Alter, *The Book of Psalms* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 20017), 348.

² Nicholas Kristof, “Why 2017 Was the Best Year in Human History,” *The New York Times* 1/6/18.

³ Steven Pinker, “The Enlightenment is Working,” *The Wall Street Journal* 1/9/18.

Through most of human history, continuing into the 19th century, a newborn was expected to live around 30 years. In the two centuries since, life expectancy *across the world* has risen to 71, and *in the developed world* to 81.

When we are able to *step back* and *set aside* the divisiveness of our own politics and our increasingly inflamed racial and class divisions, we may be quite surprised by these figures. We had not realized that the news was so good. And if we are religious, these figures can lead us to some of the hope and affirmation expressed in Psalm 100:

*Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth.
Worship the Lord with gladness;
come into his presence with singing....
Give thanks to him, bless his name.*

The cadence of the psalm matches the cadence of human history:

*...the Lord is good;
his steadfast love endures for ever,
and his faithfulness to all generations.*

IV.

That was the direction the sermon was going, and I was going to use the cautionary phrase “not we ourselves” as a warning never to equate strides in human progress with godlike powers on our own.

But then Wednesday afternoon came. Another shooting. Another school. Another set of young people killed. Another set of teachers and coaches sacrificing their lives to save the lives of their students. Another set of grieving parents, heroic first responders, community leaders with stiff upper lips, candlelight vigils, funerals in faith traditions of those who had fallen. Then, within hours, anguished cries “We must do something” followed by calls for legislation so radically divergent that, if recent history be our guide, no legislation is likely to be passed.

The hopefulness of the first half of the sermon hovered near death with the “breaking news” that never stops breaking.

Yet being a preacher, with the prospect and responsibility of standing behind a pulpit and facing a congregation within a few days, I felt compelled to ask: “Can this psalm speak to us *now*? Can it speak to us *today*? Can it express something that we are feeling, give voice to something that we are praying, teach us something that we genuinely need to know?”

I think it can, so let me talk about three phrases.

(a)

The first is the cautionary phrase I remember from childhood: “not we ourselves.” “It is he who made us,” the psalmist says, “not we ourselves.”

Given our national mood, there is a sense in which this phrase serves as a prayer of confession, an acknowledgement, that despite all the progress we have made across the centuries, we still have a long way to go in human history. There is even a sense in which had we been the ones doing the creating, we would have fouled creation up earlier, sooner, more spectacularly than it has already gone awry.

Writing in the 18th century, during that period of intellectual freedom and learning known as the Enlightenment, Voltaire provided a satirical counterpoint to the bold confidence and sense of achievement that marked the era in which he lived. He wrote:

Men must have corrupted nature a little,
Because they weren't born wolves,
Yet they've become wolves:
God didn't give them
Twenty-four pounders or bayonets,
But they've made themselves
Bayonets and cannons
With which to destroy each other.⁴

“We weren't born wolves, but we've become wolves.” What we have become is a far cry from God's original artistry. “It is he that has made us, not we ourselves.” It is “we ourselves” who have “become wolves.”

(b)

Second, but even with this dark acknowledgement of what we have become, we can find our way to what we have been created and redeemed to be, and the words of the psalm can help us.

“Enter into his gates with thanksgiving,” the psalmist proclaims, “and his courts with praise.”

- *Gates* are the threshold of the Temple, the door through which one passes to enter the public space of the house of worship.
- *Courts* are the inner sanctum, the holy of holies, the place where God is thought to reside.

The psalmist is calling the pilgrim, the reader, the worshipper down through the centuries, to take a step inside the Temple, to look around the narthex, to take a pamphlet from the literature rack, to nod to an usher, to take a bulletin, to sit down and listen to the choir rehearse prior to the service, then once the service begins, to sing the hymns, listen to the sermon, bow during the prayers. Then the psalmist is then inviting us – the citizen, the searcher, the agnostic, the family member, the believer – to move ever so slowly into the courts, the inner sanctum where God

⁴ Voltaire, *Candide*, translated by Lowell Bair (New York: Bantam Books, 2003), 24. The original translation was copyrighted in 1959.

resides, to an encounter with the presence of the living God. In other words, the psalmist is asking us to enter the gates, but then move at our own pace into the courts, where God resides.

In the past several decades, we have seen the damage that bad religion can do:

- Terrorists setting off bombs in cafes in the name of their God and their faith
- Priests abusing children and finding protection behind the collar and among the pillars of the church
- Christians in our country so aligning themselves with partisan politics that the faith suffers both *at its core* and in the eyes of *potential adherents*.

We have also seen studies that document declining religious belief and affiliation. Depending on the *religious* beliefs one adopts or the type of religious institution with which one affiliates, disbelief and disaffiliation are sometimes better options for human flourishing. We have seen the damage bad religion can do.

But I still maintain that when people are invited to cross the threshold – “the gates” – and come into a healthy church, when they are welcomed, when they are cared for, when they are nurtured with dignity and thoughtfulness, they may eventually be drawn into the “inner sanctum” – the “courts” – the place where they will find God, the place where they will find a faith that will call the best from them rather than reinforce the worst that may within them.

I do believe that one reason we are witnessing more dramatic and large-scale violence – as well as our relentless obsession with following it once it occurs – is the sheer *loneliness* that comes when people – often but not exclusively young – are not nurtured into a relationship with God for which a healthy and caring congregation can be the catalyst.

I am making an argument, a bit unusual for me, that part of the reason we are fractured as a society is that we are lonely, and part of the reason we are lonely is that fewer of us have a faith or a community of faith in our lives. This isn’t a direct cause of people taking up weapons and killing masses of other people, but it is part of the climate in which such killing occurs.⁵

“Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise.” “Enter.” “Enter.” “Come in.”

(c)

Third, the psalm also calls the worshipper to “give thanks to God, and bless his name.” In Jewish tradition, “thanksgiving” refers both to the acts of song and prayer through which we express gratitude to God *and* to the *act* of making an offering by which we serve the God to whom we are grateful. We “thank God with our lips” and then “offer” God the fruit of our labor and the work of our lives. Both lips and labor are part of the same “gesture of gratefulness” to God.⁶

⁵See Peggy Noonan, “The Parkland Massacre and the Air We Breathe,” *The Wall Street Journal* 2/17/18.

⁶ Alter 349.

My friends, I absolutely celebrate the progress the world has made. But I also know that we can do better.

Voltaire also wrote:

I'd have a high regard for...freedom...
If everything admirable in [it] weren't corrupted
By passion and party spirit.⁷

The divisiveness we have in this country – which is *reflected* in “the passion and party spirit” we see in Congress but which does not *begin* there – is part of the reason we are not doing better. The world has come so far. It has come far because of what we and others who have come before us have done. It will go further. But we can do better.

Kristof writes:

The world is registering important progress,
But it also faces mortal threats.
The first belief should empower us
To act on the second.

As much progress as we have made the last few centuries, we can do better by the Lord who has been “faithful to all generations” and whose faithfulness will never end.

Amen.

⁷ Voltaire 96.