

Sermon: Our Ascension Day Psalm

Psalm 68 is well known for perhaps being the most difficult Psalm, but I believe it to be a fine choice for this Seventh Sunday of Easter, also known as Ascension Sunday. The connection to Christ's Ascension is rooted in the way the early church read it.

Within the Psalm itself there are hints that the church's appropriation of this Psalm for its celebration of Christ's Ascension was fitting. The opening call, "May God arise, may his enemies be scattered, may his foes flee before him," sounds a lot like Paul's description of Christ's victory over God's enemies.

After recalling how God's power had raised Christ from the dead and "seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion," Paul says that God "placed all things under his feet and appointed him the head over everything for the church." Further, the title given to God "him who rides on the clouds" echoes the description of Christ's ascension that we heard in our reading today from Acts.

So, I think that Psalm 68 is a good alternative text for this Ascension Sunday, if we can get past its difficulties. Some of those difficulties are textual. One scholar says that the average minister may be intimidated by "uncertain texts, rare words, allusive language, and shifting styles." But that same scholar says, "Whatever its uncertainties, to read it or to hear it read is to experience something of the awesome, wonderful majesty of the warrior God who saves his people and brings his kingdom."

In that quote we encounter the other, and greater, difficulty with this Psalm. That difficulty is theology summed up in the phrase "warrior God." Many ministers and listeners alike will struggle with the triumph tone of this Psalm.

In a day of interfaith cooperation and religious tolerance, when the emphasis everywhere is on the unity of the human race, Psalm 68 seems like a throwback to the days of a muscular Christianity that allied itself with national pride.

In those good old days, churches sang “Onward, Christian Soldiers,” ambivalent about which soldiers were marching off to which war.

This unease with a “warrior God” is surely what led most Lectionary readings to omit the fiercest words we would find in verses 11-31.

It would be easy for the leaders of our worship to simply skip this Ascension Psalm to avoid these difficulties. Unfortunately we are living in a different world, a world filled with war, unrest, uncertainty and so much mystery of the future of humankind, we have to open our minds to the ‘warriors’ of the scriptures.

But how do we handle all of those literary difficulties? We can’t even get to the theology if we can’t make sense of the Psalm’s words. It is a processional liturgy that celebrates the glorious and triumphant rule of Israel’s God by tracing God’s march from Mount Sinai (in the days of Moses) to Mount Zion (in the days of David). In the theology of Israel’s history, the events at Mount Sinai marked the birth of the Kingdom of God among his people, while the placement of the ark in Jerusalem marked the establishment of God’s redemptive kingdom in the earth.

In other words, what we have in Psalm 68 is not a war hymn, but a kingdom hymn; not a glorification of violence, but a celebration of God’s great campaign to restore Shalom on earth.

Verses 1-3 are a call to begin the journey with God in the lead; verses 4-6 remind God’s people of the benevolence of their warrior God; and verses 7-10 recall the wilderness journey from Sinai to the Promised Land.

The call that opens this Psalm is the cry of all God’s children who have been caught up in the war initiated by evil. “May God arise, may his enemies be scattered, may you blow them away.”

It is a call for help from sad and suffering people. “But may the righteous be glad and rejoice before the Lord.” Other Psalms echo the questions of God’s suffering children: “Why are you so far off, O Lord? Why do you wait? How long will you allow us to suffer?”

Psalm 68 puts that sentiment in stronger terms. It’s time to act. “May God arise!”

Verses 6-8 are a reminder that our warrior God is a Savior, the Savior of the helpless. They show the tender intention of the God who goes to war. His heart is wide open to the marginalized, the oppressed, the victims of evil. He is “a father to the fatherless, a defender of widows.” He “sets the solitary in families; he leads forth the prisoners with singing.”

That last phrase is undoubtedly a reference to Israel’s exodus from the house of bondage in Egypt, but the rest of that stanza reveals God’s heart for all those who suffer under the hand of evil.

Verses 7-10 praises God for his care in the dry and barren places of the journey. Even when God’s people pass through the wilderness, God marches with them. In the most unlikely places, he showers his grace upon them. In lovely language that tempers the violence of other verses, God is praised for both thunderstorms that shake the earth and showers that make it bloom. The Promised Land had grown weary under the dominion of evil, but God’s powerful grace symbolized by rain “refreshed your weary inheritance.”

Our reading for Ascension Sunday skips over the next 20 some verses, because they are studded with violence, warfare, and blood. But there is also a steady emphasis, like a drumbeat, on the presence, power, and danger of God’s enemies.

There are “beasts among the reeds” waiting to attack, and “bulls among the calves of the nations” ready to charge. There are “nations who delight in war.” It’s not as though God is out to pick a fight, as though God enjoys fighting, as though God is a bully. It is rather that the enemies of God’s campaign to restore peace won’t give up, so he can’t, or won’t either. He loves his world too much to let evil ruin it.

And even though Psalm 68 talks about God’s people plunging “their feet in the blood of their foes,” the Ascension connection of the Psalm reminds us that the Son of God shed his blood even for his enemies. God is not a blood thirsty Warrior. But war and blood are a part of life, so our God immersed himself in our lives (even the blood and the war) to bring peace.

If we read Psalm 68 in the light of the death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ, we can understand why it ends with shouts of praise. In a world seemingly dominated by the power of evil, we celebrate the victory of God over evil. “Sing to God... to him who rides the ancient skies above.... Proclaim the power of God..., whose power is in the skies. You are awesome, O God, in your sanctuary; the God of Israel gives power and strength to his people.”

Those last words give us opportunity to remind people that our Warrior God is the Saviour of the World. Therefore, we who follow him are obligated to use the power he has given us to participate in his world saving campaign. And we do that best, not by picking fights with liberals, conservatives, Muslims, Jews, Aborigines, East Indians, the homeless or the under-educated, but by showing mercy to the least and the last and the lost.

In a culture fiercely divided into “them” and “us,” let us be the ones who reach out to “them” in the name of our conquering and compassionate Saviour.

But even more important than emphasizing our role in God’s peace campaign, let us be sure to focus on the victory of Christ. As important as social justice is, the center of the Gospel is Jesus and what he has done for us.

So, as Christians let us celebrate Ascension Day by doing what humans have done to preserve the peace, and let us celebrate today the sacrifice of Christ, who died violently to make us free and bring us peace.

Ascension Day is a celebration of the victory of the Crucified God who arose and now “rides the ancient skies above.” Amen