

PSALM 149

¹ Praise the LORD!
Sing to the LORD a new song,
God's praise in the assembly of the faithful.
² Let Israel be glad in its Maker;
let the children of Zion rejoice in their Ruler.
³ Let them praise God's name with dancing,
making melody to the Mighty One with tambourine and lyre.
⁴ For the LORD takes pleasure in God's people;
The Holy One adorns the humble with victory.
⁵ Let the faithful exult in glory;
let them sing for joy on their couches.
⁶ Let the high praises of God be in their throats
and two-edged swords in their hands,
⁷ to execute vengeance on the nations
and punishment on the peoples,
⁸ to bind their kings with fetters
and their nobles with chains of iron,
⁹ to execute on them the judgement decreed.
This is glory for all God's faithful ones.
Praise the LORD!

Recently I (Dr. Harris) was reading a news report on the Israeli Military bombardment on Gaza in response to the violent attack of Hamas on Israel. Interviewed were some Jewish settlers who share a highly right-wing religious faith. They were justifying the attack on Gaza as a necessary step in re-claiming the whole territory for Israel. "God gave us the land" they said. "It is biblical law, and biblical law is greater than any human law." Wow!

But is this biblical law? Does God want to give the land to a specific people (in this case – Israel) without consideration of other people who already inhabit it? Are other people any less God's precious creation?

If we read Psalm 149 in isolation from the whole story the bible tells, we could easily believe the version of biblical law settlers are arguing for. The psalm is a call to praise God with song, with musical instruments and with dancing. And the reason? God has given to the people a great victory (an anticipated victory or one that has happened at some point and hoping for a repeat). The victory is a military one. And the response of the people to such a victory is not to be one of mercy, but one of further vengeance. With the song of praise in their throats they are to take two-edged swords in their hands (a two-edged sword is meant for killing). They are to continue to execute "vengeance on the nations and punishments on the peoples" (who are their enemies all around). They are to imprison and execute and probably enslave too.

But who is this God being imaged as a God to be worshipped and praised? Is this the God who created the heavens and the earth and all that is in them? Or is this god an idol imaging the bitterness and hate in the hearts of those who have been traumatized by violence and enslavement themselves?

One of the things Patty Krawec (Indigenous activist and author who led us in a workshop October 28) told us is that no victim is purely a victim. Even though what she said hit me hard as someone who rarely feels like a victim in my privilege, I think I understand what she meant. The worst form of victimization also includes the poisoning and afflicting of a person's heart so that they are crushed by despair or the bitterness of hate. Hebrews who composed our Older Testament which includes our psalms struggle to rise above such despair and bitter hate. But sometimes they are swallowed up by it. By expressing it and having it written down after the fact, they are also recognizing that the healing journey must include the truth-telling and confessing of despair and hate in the heart. There is no purging, cleansing and the refreshment of peace in the heart without honest confession and tearful remorse and regret.

So then, I read a psalm like this one as part of a bigger healing journey. And when I do this, I can touch these words and the feelings in them. I know feelings of despair in myself at moments if not periods of time. And I know feelings of bitterness verging on hate. I know that if I were thrown into situations many are in right now in our world, like Palestinians in Gaza, it would be miraculous to escape feeling despair or bitter hate or both.

May the reading of this psalm remind us that we are all on our journey, and may it generate in us compassion for the affliction of victims everywhere.

PRAYER: O God of us all, meet us in those moments of despair in our hearts... Meet us in those moments where resentment and bitterness creep into our souls to poison our hearts... Meet us and give us fresh energy for the healing journey... For those of us who are buffered from all this in some way, grow in us a greater capacity for compassion and understanding... Even as we must stop hate and the damage it causes, grow in us a capacity to appreciate the pain and hurt behind the anger in people... even as we must encourage people to push through their despair to the other side of it, grow in us a capacity to appreciate how people can't just jump out of their grief or hopelessness like they do out of bed... May we walk alongside others as you walk alongside us... In Jesus' name... Amen.