

PSALM 114

¹ When Israel went out from Egypt,
the house of Jacob from a people of strange language,

² Judah became God's sanctuary,
Israel God's dominion.

³ The sea looked and fled;
Jordan turned back.

⁴ The mountains skipped like rams,
the hills like lambs.

⁵ Why is it, O sea, that you flee?
O Jordan, that you turn back?

⁶ O mountains, that you skip like rams?
O hills, like lambs?

⁷ Tremble, O earth, at the presence of the LORD,
at the presence of the God of Jacob,

⁸ who turns the rock into a pool of water,
the flint into a spring of water.

Have you ever experienced coming through something in your life after a struggle internal and perhaps external too? Maybe it was a health crisis, a relationship crisis, a financial crisis or a job/vocational crisis. Or maybe you're in the midst of a struggle right now and you're trying to find a way to manage it all or ground yourself with some patience and grace. Maybe there is a sadness in you you're trying to stay on top of or an anxiety you cannot shake. Maybe you are afraid of what may come or you carry the burden of what's happened and it interferes with any joy or contentment you can experience today. Maybe there's a loss in your life – a person, an ability, a life you've had and cannot have anymore – that prevents you from finding some joy. How is God in any way a part of your journey? If you had to describe how you've come through or what you're currently in, where would you see God?

Psalms like 114 are intended to offer the people language and imagery to see God in their lives and in their world. Unless we're given some language and imagery as humans, we may totally miss the God who is invisible to the eye and yet very much there in every particle and molecule of life. So what story does this psalm tell and where is God in it? Wherever the reader/reciter of this psalm may be in their life journey, what its imagery offers is a core founding story of the people, a story that reminds them about how they found God after generations of enslavement and suffering. So where was God when they found God?

1) “Judah became God’s sanctuary, Israel God’s dominion.” (v.2) Centuries later Jesus, and Paul following Jesus too, calls God’s people to become the “temple of the Holy Spirit.” In other words: the first place to find God is in you. We can look everywhere for God, but if we cannot find God within, we have not found God. How do we cultivate a capacity and discernment for God speaking within us? For the Hebrews it had to be about gathering together, interacting, learning the law (scripture), prayer, worship, meditation and making courageous choices toward freedom which further reinforced God’s speaking and working in and among them.

2) The rest of the psalm refers to amazing things that happened in nature as the people made their way to the promised land – from the parting of the sea (“The sea fled”) to lightning, thunder and volcanic flames on the holy mountain when they received the 10 commandments (“the mountains skipped like rams”), to the supply of fresh water in their wilderness thirst (God “turns the rock into a pool of water”). The thing that strikes me in this wonderful imagery drawn from natural phenomena is how it points to God’s liberating and empowering presence. Rather than “tremble” (v.7) in fear, the reader/reciter is invited to tremble with awe at the presence and liberating presence of God. As God created a path to freedom in the past, so God may do the same today. When we believe and feel God is with us doors open, nature provides its bounty and we see benevolence all around us. When we are gripped by guilt, a fear that is crippling, or shame, we believe God is against us as is life and nature as a whole.

How do we turn our tragedies, losses, and cataclysms of illness, nature or the cruel actions of others, into openings, invitations and spurs to seeking God again within and around us? How do we then begin again a journey of liberation like the people of old? I’m convinced Psalm 114 was composed to provide a people feeling like they’ve returned to Egypt again, an incitement to begin their journey to freedom once more. And it all begins by rediscovering God within, that we are temples of the Holy Spirit, sanctuaries of God’s liberating presence within seeking to draw us forth by parting the sea before us, appearing on the mountain with a word, a way forward, a vision toward a new freedom, abundance and peace...

It may take some time. Meaningful and profound journeys of salvation don’t happen overnight. The people were in the wilderness 40 years before they were internally freed from enslavement sufficient to live the freedom they had claimed. What about you and me?

PRAYER: We know freedom is not just a one time thing, O God, but a life long journey. As new challenges seek to enslave us in our lives, we need to rediscover your presence within and around us, calling us to new freedom and new power to be and become. Show yourself to us, O God, in fresh stirrings within. Speak to us in the ordinary, everyday beauty in the world around us we so often miss in our preoccupation and distraction which closes us in and shuts us down... May your Spirit shine in and through us... Amen.