

PSALM 81: 1-10

- ¹ Sing aloud to God our strength; shout for joy to the God of Jacob.
² Raise a song, sound the tambourine, the sweet lyre with the harp.
³ Blow the trumpet at the new moon, at the full moon, on our festal day.
⁴ For it is a statute for Israel, an ordinance of the God of Jacob.
⁵ God made it a decree in Joseph, when the Lord went out over the land of Egypt.

I hear a voice I had not known:

- ⁶ I relieved your shoulder of the burden; your hands were freed from the basket.
⁷ In distress you called, and I rescued you; I answered you in the secret place of thunder;
I tested you at the waters of Meribah.
⁸ Hear, O my people, while I admonish you; O Israel, if you would but listen to me!
⁹ There shall be no strange god among you; you shall not bow down to a foreign god.
¹⁰ I am the LORD your God, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt.
Open your mouth wide and I will fill it.

It is hard to forget bad things that happen to us. They linger in our minds and hearts and shape how we look at our lives, how we look at the world and the relationships we form. Hurts make it difficult to trust others and open our hearts. Betrayals make us bitter and prone to see the worst in others. Neglect makes us see others as essentially selfish and us having to look out for ourselves alone in an indifferent universe.

But what about remembering good things that have happened? How do the blessings and thanksgivings for the rich blessings and abundant love in our lives, those experiences of grace from others who didn't have to love and care for us as they have, how do we celebrate those good things in a way that gives us faith, hope, and love in the present?

Psalms 81 refers to one of the great festivals for the Jewish people – the festival of Tabernacles or Harvests (today it is known as *Sukkot*, second in importance to Passover). The accent of the festival is thanksgiving, with various musical instruments leading into singing, dancing, eating and drinking in celebration of the blessings. The biblical book of Exodus tells the story of the establishment (“decree”) of this festival. Psalm 81 would be spoken and sung as part of worship at such a festival.

One of the powerful things about this psalm, like others too, is pronoun shifts in who is addressing whom. From a public proclamation to intimate pleas and sharing from the heart, from the psalmist speaking on behalf of the people to God, to God addressing the people directly in very personal terms, psalms can take us into all kinds of emotional and spiritual adventures. In the first clause of Psalm 81, the people are addressed in the third person and called to celebrate the festival.

In the second clause, however, the reason for the festival is provided in God's own voice addressing the people directly, recalling their time of enslavement under the Egyptians:

"I hear a voice I have not known..." The people of Israel enslaved in Egypt had lost faith and hope and had given up calling on God. God had not "known" them, until Moses comes and awakens their faith and hope in freedom. They begin to call up to God.

"I relieved your shoulder of the burden; your hands were freed from the basket..." The people were being worked hard with heavy burdens to carry day and night. Freedom meant freedom from the burden of slavery.

"In distress you called and I answered you..." Finally they cried up to God and God answered their cries through Moses, Aaron and Miriam who led the people against Pharaoh and out of Egypt.

"I answered you in the secret place of thunder..." God gave them the 10 commandments at Mount Sinai with mighty signs of thunder and lightening, and established a covenant with them.

"I tested you at the waters of Meribah..." The journey to the promised land was long and hard, and the people questioned their faith in God and their leaders to the breaking point. At Meribah, they found water and were reminded that God would never abandon them. They recommitted themselves to their covenant of faith with God.

In the last clause they are called to remember and give thanks. God brought them out of Egypt and brought them to the land they are now on. They have plenty to eat and a place to call home. God continues to nourish them body and soul: "Open your mouth wide and I will fill it." They must have no other god but God.

So, what celebrations are important to you? How do you express thanksgiving? How has God been the invisible yet foundational presence on your journey? How has God filled you? Is there any other god but God in your life?

PRAYER: Fill our hearts with thanksgiving, O God... Remind us of all we have to feel grateful about... And this is all the more urgent the harder life has been and can yet become... Gratitude empowers us to live and breath the half glass that is full rather than grasping for air through the half glass that is empty... Remind us, O God, how you have always been there... You have always sent people to be there for us, whether we were ready to receive them or not, kind to them or not, grateful to them and for them or not. Angels are all around us as much as there are sinister currents in and around us too... May we give thanks, today, for the angels... In Jesus' name... Amen.