

PSALM 95: 1-5, 8-11

¹ O come, let us sing to the LORD;
let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!
² Let us come into God's presence with thanksgiving;
let us make a joyful noise to the Lord with songs of praise!
³ For the LORD is a great God,
and a great ruler above all gods.
⁴ In God's hand are the depths of the earth;
the heights of the mountains are the Lord's also.
⁵ The sea is God's, for God made it,
and the dry land, which the Mighty One's hands have formed.

⁸ Do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah,
as on the day at Massah in the wilderness,
⁹ when your ancestors tested me,
and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work.
¹⁰ For forty years I loathed that generation
and said, 'They are a people whose hearts go astray,
and they do not regard my ways.'
¹¹ Therefore in my anger I swore,
'They shall not enter my rest.'

When reading many psalms through, you will notice sudden shifts in theme, tone and pronouns. From lament, to rage, to grievance at God, to surrender... From thanksgiving, to supplication... from faith, to doubt, to faith again... At one moment a psalm is addressing God in third person language and then shifts to first person appeal. Sometimes, it is the psalmist's voice and sometimes it is God's voice addressing the people and reader. Is this all just poor editing or is there intention behind the composition?

I, like others, believe that many psalms are pieces of poetry sewn together. They are particular prayers and creative compositions joined together to create a larger psalm for worship purposes. But is it just poor editing that makes the transitions from section to section so jarring and dissonant? Or is there some artistic and spiritual effect such moves within a psalm create?

Psalm 95 offers us a wonderful example to ponder. The opening section of verses (I've included 1-5) are an invitation and call for the people to offer up thanksgiving and praise to God. God is great above all gods and God is creator of all that exists. It is only fitting for humans who are themselves creations of God and dependent on creation for their existence, to offer up praise and thanksgiving to the creator of all. I can imagine the "joyful noise" the musicians would be making for singers to be singing these verses. Thanksgiving requires a "joyful noise" to express it.

But then, there is a sudden shift (vs. 8 onwards) in tone and in theme. I imagine the music changing also to dramatize the effect. God is now addressing the people and God is

upset. God recalls more difficult times when the first generation of the people liberated from slavery continued to question and doubt God's steadfast love and faithfulness to them. Even as they had been liberated they feared they would fail to reach their promised destination. In their fear, they doubted and they fell away from their faithfulness to God. The relationship was strained if not broken and needed healing and restoration. Was that possible? Even as God was "angry" and "swore" the people would not enter God's promised "rest", God never abandoned them because God's love is stubbornly steadfast and abundantly faithful.

So why name the upset now, in a psalm and during worship? Why throw ice water on the warm fire of thanksgiving and praise? Is it, perhaps, that there is danger the people are prone to "harden" their hearts (read: lose their faith, give in to their doubts and abandon faithfulness to God's love and justice) once again? And if they are, indeed, in danger of hardening their hearts, how can their thanksgiving and praise for divine steadfast love and faithfulness be genuine and real rather than empty ritual and rote Sabbath worship?

You see, the aim of the psalm is to rouse the people to get right with God, themselves and each other. It's intent is to wake them up to their perilous spiritual state of being. They are in danger of faltering and falling. The disease of inner hardness will numb them from feeling for one another and opening their hearts to grow in love and care.

Hardness of heart and spiritual numbness is a danger for us all. As things happen and challenges come our way, in our effort to cope and survive day by day, doing what we need to do, we fail to recognize the signs of inner hardness and numbness. We listen to people but we're also distracted. We live less and less in the present as resentment for what's happened yesterday and anxious thoughts about what may happen tomorrow crowd in. Our prayer, worship and meditation (if we keep at it at all) become ever more rote and less transformative. Psalm 95 is an invitation to feel our way once again to thanksgiving with an exuberant heart. And if such thanksgiving with a joyful noise is feeling remote for us right now, perhaps we need to diagnose our inner hardness, confess it and release it before God once again so that we be liberated for a richer humanity suffused with gratitude and love.

PRAYER: O God of love, energy flow seeking to penetrate open and welcoming hearts, please break through any hardness and numbness within us at this time... Sometimes we just have to live day by day to cope, O God... But at what cost? Don't abandon us. Flow in fresh ways and find new paths into our spirits... Enliven our capacity for gratitude and our practice of prayer... May we make a joyful noise before you liberated to let go and surrender ourselves in thanksgiving... Amen.