

Sermon Prepared by The Rev. Matt Rhodes for  
St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Forest, Virginia  
Sixth Sunday of Easter, May 22, 2022

(Psalm 67)

Several months ago I preached a sermon on Psalm 111 and talked about the challenge of speaking on something that comes from the hymnbook of the Bible. Then as now I see a challenge inherent in trying to preach on a song ... not using the text of the song to supplement the sermon but instead as its basis. How do we as preachers tackle something like that, particularly when a psalm is not – by and large – the default text many would use for a sermon? Then, suddenly – perhaps even miraculously – the Lectionary presents us with something as incredible as Psalm 67, and the challenge is accepted.

Listen to the psalm again, but this time in a slightly different translation. Compare it with the version printed in your service leaflet, and see what jumps out at you:

*May God grant us his grace and bless us, may He shine His face upon us.  
To know on the earth Your way, among all the nations Your rescue.  
Nations acclaim You, O God, all peoples acclaim you.  
Nations rejoice in glad song, for You rule peoples rightly, and nations on earth You lead.  
Nations acclaim You, O God, all peoples acclaim you.  
The earth gives its yield. May God bless us.  
May God bless us, and all the ends of the earth hear Him.*<sup>1</sup>

There are a few things to point out here about the structure of the psalm. First, as with many hymns there are verses and a refrain. There's a structure of five units: to start with, a prayer for blessing found in verses one and two; then, the refrain in verse three; verse four outlines a specific reason for praise; then we again return to the refrain in verse five; and finally, in verses six and seven, we end with a prayer for blessing.<sup>2</sup>

Second, the first verse is an echo of the priestly benediction found in the Book of Numbers. Here, in the alternate translation I used, we begin with "May God be merciful to us and bless us, show us the light of his countenance and come to us."<sup>3</sup> Compare that with the verses from Numbers, words which may be familiar to many of you as the words of an old benediction: "The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Alter. *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary – The Writings*, pp. 160-1.

<sup>2</sup> Christine Roy Yoder, "Psalm 67: Exegetical Perspective." *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Vol. 2*, p. 481.

<sup>3</sup> Psalm 67:1 (NRSV).

<sup>4</sup> Numbers 6:24-26 (NRSV).

Finally, this psalm ... a harvest hymn, a celebration of the graciousness of God in which the themes of blessing and praise dominate<sup>5</sup> ... contains echoes of language found in Genesis: “I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”<sup>6</sup>

With all of this in mind ... all the historical and theological context and the effort put into crafting a well-structured song of praise ... there are two questions to which I keep returning. First, *how big is our God?* And second, what does it mean about *our relationship* to God and about the relationship of God to other nations and peoples? I believe they are questions worth considering.

In terms of relationship, the psalmist is sharing the idea of interconnectedness ... the knowledge that the blessings we receive from God will be a sign and call to *all* of creation. As Walter Brueggemann writes, “The well-being of Israel carried the potential for the well-being of other nations. Israel is never permitted to live in a vacuum. It must always live with, for, and among the others.”<sup>7</sup> “[T]here is always more to Israel’s affirmation of YHWH than just its own well-being.”<sup>8</sup> The blessings of God were not limited in simply being available just to his chosen community; here the psalmist tells us that his saving health can be known to *all*.

And it is from that point ... the potential for God to be known by all ... that the other question should be addressed. How big *is* our God? I would venture a guess that the first words that may come to mind when considering this question are *limitless*, or *boundless*, or *infinite*. Each of those is correct, but I find them in some respects to be a bit paradoxical when put up against the way some Christians act. Christians acknowledge the limitless nature of God, and yet there are those among Christians who try to limit God to specific groups. Christians acknowledge the boundless nature of God, and yet some try to bind God to individual communities or to a particular, narrow set of beliefs.

God is limitless, yes, and God is with us – whether we sense the presence or not – in our most intimate moments ... the moments of joy and of sorrow, the moments of calm and of fear. God was there with the killed and injured in the Tops grocery store in Buffalo. God was there with the killed and injured at the Irvine Taiwanese Presbyterian Church in Laguna Beach, California. God was with all lost to illness, accident or violence.

And most assuredly God was, is and will be with those left behind to question why, to mourn, and to remember. God is and will be with all who suffer in mind, body or spirit. God is and will be with all suffering the loss of a loved one ... the loss of a

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<sup>5</sup> Walter Brueggemann and William H. Bellinger, Jr. *Psalms*, p. 290.

<sup>6</sup> Genesis 12:3 (NRSV).

<sup>7</sup> Walter Brueggemann. *Genesis*, p. 119.

<sup>8</sup> Brueggemann and Bellinger, p. 291.

relationship ... the loss of stability in life ... and who struggle with the grief of those losses.

And here we return to the words of the psalmist: “May he shine his face upon us.” God ... and the blessings we receive from God, and the comfort we receive from God ... are not simply “things” to be admired or possessed by one person or group alone. They must be *shared with the world*. Words of joy and thanksgiving, and yes, even words of sorrow and lament, aren’t ones to be spoken in secret, but to be *shared with all*. May he shine his face upon us ... *all*.

When we don’t do these things ... when we don’t pass our blessings on and welcome others into our moments of thanksgiving ... when we don’t extend our reach to those suffering in mind, body, or spirit, those experiencing no sense of joy or thanksgiving ... what disservice are we doing to God and to one another? When we don’t – in the words of Brueggemann – do as Israel and live *with, for and among all others*, what disservice are we doing to God and to one another? Setting limits closes doors; setting boundaries deprives others; taking steps to make the infinite finite obscures the potential of what the psalmist is proclaiming.

In this season of Easter, *Let the peoples praise you, O God. Let **all** the peoples praise you.*

God is not only as big as some perhaps *want or desire* God to be; *God is as big as God is* and moves beyond any boundaries we may try to set. Remember the first four words of Genesis ... the first four words of *everything*: “In the beginning God.”<sup>9</sup> From the beginning of time, *all* God has is offered to *all*. Here in this psalm, we are reminded that the righteousness and love ... and yes, even judgment ... of God are there for all. “No one is exempt, and no one is excluded from its span.”<sup>10</sup> “We are blessed in order to bless others. God’s goal is the entire world.”<sup>11</sup>

*Let the peoples praise you, O God. Let all the peoples praise you. And may we through a demonstration and sharing of our blessings ... our thanksgiving ... our gratitude ... make us instruments of that praise, and comfort, and strength.*

For *all*.

Amen.

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<sup>9</sup> Genesis 1:1 (NRSV).

<sup>10</sup> Patricia Farris, “Psalm 67: Pastoral Perspective.” *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Vol. 2*, p. 484.

<sup>11</sup> William L. Self, “Psalm 67: Homiletical Perspective.” *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Vol. 2*, p. 483.