

Our psalmist says, “Let the peoples praise you O God, Let all the peoples praise you.” This verse is at the heart of psalm 67 and is in response to God’s many blessings, that is: being blessed as God’s chosen people, and being blessed from the abundance of the earth. Our psalmist lets us know that God is merciful and gives us his blessing, that God gives us His presence, and that God does this so that we can understand God’s ways, and finally that God intends deliverance - salvation if you will - for God’s people. And our response is to praise God, Let all the peoples praise you O God.¹

Earlier this week, I asked the choir if the “Church with the Beautiful Gardens” has ever done a Rogation Sunday procession or conducted its worship around Rogation Days. It seemed plausible to me that a rural area that also has waterman, and with so many parishioners enjoying working in the dirt, carefully nurturing delicate plants, weeding, watering, feeding to create such splendid beauty, that such a church would be a place for this largely forgotten worship service. The word “rogation” comes from the Latin, “rogare” meaning “to ask.” Historically, the church asks for

¹ William L. Self, “Homeletical Perspective,” *Feasting on the Word, Year C Vol 2*, (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville KY) 2009, 481.

God's blessing on all the life her people hope to harvest on land and in the sea. If your curious, you'll see that on page 258 of the Book of Common Prayer, there are prayers for Rogation Days. And Psalm 67 works perfectly for this task as it asks for God's blessing, God's presence, and God's deliverance. In God's response, the abundance of the earth, the people cannot help it ... they must praise God.

Psalm 67 also works to amplify our reading from Acts. Using the metaphor of planting and preparing for the harvest, we learn how Christianity was planted in Europe. From that very first European Christian, that tiny mustard seed, and entire faith community grew and the whole world has been changed as a result. A seemingly random and chance encounter has had profound ramifications - when such moments happen to me, I call them Holy Spirit moments. In these moments we know that God has blessed us abundantly indeed. Let all the peoples praise God.

Our Gospel passage from John is part of Jesus' "farewell discourse" and in it, Jesus is preparing his disciples for his death and departure from them. In our liturgical life, we too are preparing for Jesus' earthly departure by being reminded that while Jesus is not physically present, he is

constantly available to us and is present in a different form - namely through the actions of the Holy Spirit and through the church.

We see in Acts of the Apostles that God and Jesus are indeed present in a very real way. Paul is shown as changing course at least twice due to promptings of the Jesus or the Holy Spirit. First, Jesus converts him on the road to Damascus. Then Paul comes to understand that Christ's saving embrace reaches the whole world, even to the gentiles. Peter, too comes to the same conclusion, as we learned last week. And in today's reading, Paul is preparing to share the good news, to live into the directive of Psalm 67 by praising God in sharing the Gospel message to the good people of Asia. And in a vision, Paul and his people are convinced to change course, to travel in the opposite direction, and head to Europe toward what is today, Greece and Turkey. Paul has just been asked to move outside his comfort zone, and as Paul has always been faithful to God, he obeys.

Once again, we see God at work in unlikely people. Paul heads to a port city, a cosmopolitan place where people from all over the known world and from every economic class gather. There is a Jewish community there, perhaps one that would welcome followers of the Way. There were also

gentile people who had heard of the Jewish God, and were inclined to worship that God. Paul encounters a gathering of gentiles praying to the Jewish God outside the city gate, on the river and the gathering is a group of women. Within this group of women is Lydia - the head of her own household. Not only is she the head of her own household, she's a business woman. If this story were told today, she would not be a seller of purple cloth, she would be the owner of Armani, or similar fashion house that caters to wealthy people. She has something in common with Paul: she is willing to be at God's disposal and she is open to being guided by the Holy Spirit. Paul's sharing of the Gospel, opens Lydia's heart further, and she and all her household are baptized. God prepared both Paul's and Lydia's heart to hear, receive and understand the Gospel. By giving Paul an invitation he could not refuse, Lydia becomes one of the missionaries on the Way. She too shares the Gospel with others in such a way that the Roman Empire ultimately becomes the Holy Roman Empire. In this story we see where divine guidance and human faithfulness come together. We see that God's blessings caused them to be blessings to others.²

² Ronald Cole-Turner, *"Theological Perspective," Feasting on the Word, Year C Vol 2* (Westminster John Knox Press) 2009. 476

So what can we learn from our readings this morning? How might our readings apply to us, in our context? Paul and his companion Timothy were asked to operate outside of their comfort zone, to go to places they had never been before. This shouldn't be new to faithful people of God, Abram and Sarai were asked to do the same thing. To work with God in bringing about God's kingdom means being countercultural and if that isn't working outside our comfort zone, I don't know what is. Closer to home, right here, right now, more pragmatically, we being asked to move outside our comfort zone and be the church in a way that we aren't used to being.

In that narrow frame of reference, the question we might ask ourselves is are we able to be decisive as Lydia was decisive? Are we willing, as Lydia and Paul were willing to be at God's disposal? Are we open to being guided by the Holy Spirit? In a larger frame of reference, just how big do we understand God to be? Do we believe that God is just our God or is God the God of the whole world? If we believe God is the God of the whole world, do we see our work on behalf of God's kingdom to be one of reconciliation and justice? In God's name, will we embrace "the other?"

Do we understand that God's blessings are always God's gift to us, and every blessing we receive is a sign of God's continuing relationship

with us? As a community we crave stability - can we find that stability in God's and in Christ's constancy, in their presence among us? Can we ask that God continue to make us fruitful, that we continue to touch lives in ways that far exceed our numbers on Sunday? Can we keep finding a way to share the Gospel in such a way that we are constantly praising God for all that God has done for us? And if we aren't quite there yet, are we willing to pray that we become willing?

As for me, I am willing to place myself at God's disposal. I am willing to be guided by the Holy Spirit. I can certainly be decisive. My prayers include being smacked upside the head with a metaphorical two by four so I know clearly what God expects from me and from us. I know that the Spirit works in community and as a community we will come to understand together where we are to go and what we are to do. Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday are rogation days and so I will be asking God to bless us and to bless us abundantly. I know that God hears my prayers and I trust that we will be blessed. This trust fills my heart with joy and I will praise God and urge you to praise God as well.

AMEN.