

Going Global

A Sermon for Every Sunday, July 7, 2019
The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost, Year C
Psalm 66

You might think that this Sunday's psalm would say, "Come on, all you fellow Jews. God has delivered us from imperial slavery in Egypt! We're God's chosen! Come on, let's give thanks and praise to God for that deliverance! We're special. We have been loved by God in a very special way in the exodus from slavery. Israel, praise God!"

And the psalm does some of that, but that which I find most curious is that Psalm 66 summons, not just God's people, Israel, but "All the earth" and "All the nations" to join in praising God.

All?

We often begin our church services with a "Call to Worship," sometimes spoken by the pastor, sometimes sung by the choir. We begin our service with an assembling of the congregation, by offering an invitation. "We're ready to begin worship now. Please silence your cell phones. You kids sit down now. Lord, all your family is here. Let's praise God."

But Psalm 66 doesn't only call God's people, Israel, to worship, but rather turns up the loudspeaker and broadcasts the "Call to Worship" over the whole earth, calling upon "all nations" and indeed "all the earth" to join Israel in praise.

I'm sorry if you thought your religion was a "personal matter," something "just between me and Jesus." This morning's psalm invites the whole town, the whole world to join us in worship. I'm sorry if you thought of our worship as that time when we gather in our church, close the doors, and interact with God, just the church and God.

We used to talk about "public worship," distinguishing our Sunday gatherings from our times of personal prayer. In Psalm 66 worship goes more than public: it goes global.

"Do you think it's right to try to talk religion in public?" someone asks.

Another person wonders, "Should we attempt to share our faith with those who are not of our faith?"

Those questions are answered in Psalm 66.

Shout joyfully to God, all the earth!
Sing praises to the glory of God's name!
Make glorious his praise! (verse 2)
All you nations, bless our God!
Let the sound of his praise be heard! (verse 8)

“I come to worship on Sunday in order to hear and ponder God’s word,” says one. “Worship is when I receive comfort and peace in my troubled life,” says another. And both of those definitions of worship are fine, as far as they go. But Psalm 66 pushes us beyond our prayer and praise being an in-house, intramural, personal, church affair. Here the worshippers address “all the earth” and shout out an invitation to “all you nations” to join us in worship.

We are conditioned to think of our Sunday worship as praise, as something between us and God. Psalm 66 urges us to look at worship as witness to the whole world. We tend to think of our times of worship as inward; this psalm invites us to think of what we do here on Sundays as outward.

“Jesus Christ did not die for the church. Christ thinks all of it is his!” proclaimed an evangelist to the congregation where I grew up.

The first Bible verse I learned was John 3:16, “For God so loved people like me that God gave....” No! “God so loved the WORLD.” Nobody, no corner of world, is immune from Jesus saying, “*Mine!*”

If we, the church, are chosen to listen to, adore, and praise God, we are also at the same time chosen to witness to the world about the God who has chosen us.

I think it’s fair to characterize Psalm 66 as a mission psalm. Yes, Israel has been assigned a mission by God: to worship God so well, in the Temple *and* in daily life, that the nations would see what a great God is Israel’s God. Therefore Israel believed that we not only receive truth, blessing, and liberation from God, but also an *assignment*.

In a world where there is much ugliness, the beauty of our Sunday worship is a witness to the world of how God can take us and our gifts and form them into acts of beauty. In a world where there are strong voices of hate, resentment, and animosity, the words we use in this place can be a witness to the world that God enables us to speak words of love and compassion. In a world where many tend to think of their material possessions as “mine,” in our offering here we

witness that it is possible for people to be open-handed and giving in response to the world's needs.

We know, from our encounter with the New Testament, that when Christ calls, he doesn't call people to be Christians or first of all to have happier, more fulfilled lives, but rather calls them to himself only to send them forth in his name to spread his good news to everybody. We're commissioned as his agents, his carriers of the infection called "gospel."

America has some striking, fierce divisions. Every town has its gaps, walls, big divides. How is it possible for a group of folk like us to gather and sing off the same page, so to speak?

It is an affirmation of faith that Jesus Christ makes possible that which the world considers impossible. Christ has called us not only to believe in him but also to follow him, even more, to emulate him, to engage in the same moves in our lives that characterized his life, to sing the notes that he sang *in order that the whole world might join in the song that Christ sings.*

The church is called to be a showcase for what God can do. The world is quite right to look at us and see an organization that is markedly different from the world.

The pagan Roman world looked at the early church and marveled that here was a group of people that was not organized as the world organized itself – on the basis of family, gender, class and money. The surrounding Roman culture said, "See how they love one another!" Alas, too often the world looks at congregations today and exclaims, "Look how they fight with one another"

"We have a loving, caring church. When any member of a church is in need, the rest of the church immediately responds. We have one another's back," a person said to me recently. While it was heart-warming to hear her positive assessment of her congregation, I said, maybe inspired (or corrected!) by Psalm 66, "Sorry, that's not good enough."

Even as Israel is to be the visible, public, witness to who God is and what God's up to in the world, the church is, for better or worse, the Body of Christ, the way the risen Christ has chosen to take up room in the world, Christ's great appeal to the world. Us. When you think about the actual churches you know, you're apt to think that it's a heck of a way to present the Kingdom of God to the world, but it's distinctively His way.

God could have chosen others, but oddly, God chose us. We cannot say why we have been chosen by God to be the church but we know wherefore. The joy of the Christian life is

that we have received good news; the responsibility of the Christian life is that we are to bear this news into the world.

This morning's psalm gathers God's people only to have them enter the Temple by inviting the whole world. A few concluding questions: how inviting and welcoming is your congregation? In your signage, in the way you receive visitors, do you convey hospitality to the whole world? When you make decisions about how you will use church resources, the programs you offer and the work you do, are you motivated by mostly inward or outward concern? Is your worship accessible to all? On Sunday, do you look something like the Realm of God? Do you do a good job of explaining and teaching others about your style of worship so that they may join you in our praise?

These questions are important because, as the "Body of Christ" (Paul's favorite designation for the church) your church may be the only bodily presence of Christ that the world sees. When the world looks at you on Sundays, what does it see of Christ?

All you nations, bless our God!

Let the sound of his praise be heard!

—William H. Willimon © 2019

