



“Come and See”
Scripture – Psalm 66:1-9
Sermon Preached by Sudie Niesen Thompson
Sunday, July 3, 2016

June 29: “Carnage and Panic Abound During Attack at Istanbul’s Busy Airport”

June 24: “Historic West Virginia Flash Floods Kill At Least 23 People”

June 12: “50 Dead, 53 Hospitalized In Orlando Shooting”¹

The headlines paint a bleak picture of the world in which we live. If the news is any indication, it seems that the ‘principalities and powers’, the “rulers of the darkness”² – to borrow language from Ephesians – have won out. Destruction is all around; tragedy and terror are the new normal. And the death toll is rising.

At this point many of us are numb to the news. When devastation that once seemed incomprehensible becomes commonplace, how else are we supposed to suppress the groundswell of grief that would otherwise consume us? Many of us are fatigued; we’ve run out of tears and condolences and prayers and can only muster an impatient, “Enough!” Many of us are angry, livid, enraged that the (Quote) “Rulers of Darkness” have triumphed yet again. So we turn to the heavens and cry out, “How long, O Lord?” Such words from the prophets and the psalms of lament come so easily these days ... Certainly more easily than the words of Psalm 66: Make a joyful noise to God, all the earth!

Yet these are the words that the Spirit, or – at least – the Lectionary, has given us this day. “Make a joyful noise to God, all the earth; sing the glory of his name.” They are words that might seem inauthentic or inappropriate – callous, even, given the events of the past few weeks. “Say to God, ‘How awesome are your deeds!’” These words seem empty or misplaced in a world reeling from acts of terror, not acts of love. “Bless our God, O peoples, let the sound of his praise be heard ...” How can these words speak to the chaos that surrounds us? Yet, the words of this psalm are ones that we need now more than ever. For in times like these, when we cannot summon them on our own, we need words of praise to fling buoyantly in the face of destruction and death.

Psalm 66 is not the daydream of a Pollyannaish poet; it is not a call to praise born of blind optimism or willful ignorance. It is a radical confession of faith in the God who keeps us among the living, who will not let our feet slip.

You see, at the center of this psalm is a story of God’s saving deeds on behalf of the covenant community. “[The Lord] turned the sea into dry land,” the poet recounts. “[The people] passed through the river on foot. There we rejoiced in [the Lord], who rules by his might forever!”

It is a story of liberation – of God looking on the people’s misery, and leading them out of bondage with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm.

It is a story of deliverance – of the Lord hearing the people’s cries and bringing them into a land where songs of praise could ring out.

It is the story of the Exodus, and it is at the heart of Israel’s faith.

This is what the Psalmist calls the whole world to “come and see.” Come and see – God has delivered the people Israel from slavery to freedom, from death to life. Come and see God’s life-giving work! Come – grab your tambourines, like Miriam whose song heralded freedom on the Red Sea’s muddy shores, and join the faithful in making a joyful noise to God!

No – this psalm is *not* the daydream of a Pollyannaish poet. It is a call to hope. Because this song of praise invites us to remember who God is.

If we know Israel’s story ... for that matter, if we know the *Gospel* story ... we know that our hope is well-placed. For we hope in a God who “wills and works for life.”³ Even when the world seems shrouded in darkness, even when the cries of “How long, O Lord?” are quick to escape our lips, we can take comfort in the God “who has kept us among the living, and has not let our feet slip.” This is the truth the psalmist invites us to remember even when – no, *especially* when – the “Rulers of Darkness” seem to have the upper hand.

When tragedy after tragedy makes us feel like we’re standing on the Red Sea’s shores, waiting for God to part the waters and lead us to dry land, we can still heed the psalmist’s call: Make a joyful noise to God, all the earth! We make this joyful noise, not out of blind optimism or willful ignorance, but out of hope – hope in the God of the Exodus, the God of the Resurrection, who is *still* bringing us from death to life.

This, my friends, is what *we* have to offer this world. We have hope – Hope that is rooted in the one who wills and works for life, hope that rings out in songs of praise. So we join with the psalmist in saying, “Come and see what God has done!” Come and see God’s life-giving work. Come and see the God who enters into the most present darkness, and transforms that darkness to light. We fling these words in the face of destruction and death, and invite others to join in the song: “Make a joyful noise,” we cry. “Make a joyful noise to God all the earth!”

It is a hopeful act. It is a creative act. It is a defiant act. And, it is an act that the world desperately needs.

I was moved to read about a community of faith doing this very thing – not so much with words of praise, but with canvases and pastels and paintbrushes.

On the morning of the Orlando Shooting, Lisle Gwynn Garrity – a Pastor-Artist (or “Pastorist,” as she calls herself) was leading an art workshop for the people of Pleasant Hill Presbyterian Church in Duluth, Georgia. Lisle invited this congregation into another story of God’s awesome deeds – the story of the Lord working in the Valley of Dry Bones to bring the covenant people from death to life.

Reflecting on this story from Ezekiel, she called this community of faith to bring life to the black canvases that lay before them.

“We didn’t yet know all the details of the tragedy,” Lisle writes of that experience on the morning of June 12th.

“...We didn’t yet know the fullness of your despair. We didn’t yet know that 100 of you were either injured or killed in those early morning hours. And yet, 80 of us crowded together in anxious curiosity for what could become of these black canvases, these dark valleys of despair we were to fill with light.

“We didn’t yet know the fullness of your tragedy. We didn’t yet know that, in the breaking of the dawn, you were smothered with darkness. And yet, together, we illuminated our dark canvases with bold color and light.

“We didn’t yet know the fullness of your hopelessness. And yet we painted hope. We did it for ourselves. We did it for the world. We did it for *you*.”⁴

This, my friends, is our work as people of faith: to paint hope into a world shrouded in darkness. To *speak* hope into a world shrouded in darkness. To make a joyful noise and to *sing* hope into a world shrouded in darkness.

This is what the psalmist invites us to do, and gives us words to proclaim. So, we lay claim to these words of praise – to this radical confession of faith in the God who keeps us among the living, who will not let our feet slip. We inscribe these words on our hearts, and we fling them buoyantly in the face of destruction and death, saying: Come and see. Come and see what God has done. Come and see that the powers and principalities, the rulers of darkness have not and will not triumph. Come and see the God of the Exodus, the God of the Resurrection. Come and see the God who is still at work, bringing us from death to life. Come and see. Come and see.

NOTES

1. Headlines from www.npr.org
2. Ephesians 6:12, KJV
3. J. Clinton McCann, “Commentary on Psalm 66:1-9,” www.workingpreacher.org
4. Lisle Gwynn Garrity, “Painting Hope in the Midst of Tragedy,” www.sanctifiedart.com

Prayer – By Rev. Lindsay Conrad, adapted for Independence Day Weekend

We praise you, O God, who raised your voice and sang your Spirit over the chaos of creation to make all that is beautiful and good and precious in your sight.

We rejoice in you, O God, who gave songs to the prophets, melodies to the people who you saved from flood and fire and famine.

We celebrate you, O God, who David delighted in dance and poetry, who Miriam gave glory with cymbal and drum.

From the melodies in our hearts and the songs in our souls, we give thanks and praise to our savior Jesus the Christ.

Cooing into silent nights, Jesus entered the world amongst the lowly. Chanting songs of freedom, Jesus proclaimed good news to the captive. Calling forth from the tombs, Jesus granted new life to people claimed by death. Wailing and weeping, Jesus understood the stress and sorrow of a broken world. Frolicking around wells and streams, Jesus opened hearts to Living Water. Dancing through death, Jesus invites us to proclaim life in death’s bitter sting.

So we come to this table with deep joy and humble gratitude, for we know that:
Breaking bread, Jesus feeds us with a hunger for justice.
Pouring cup, Jesus invites us to join into the song of salvation.

Come, Holy Spirit, and stir in our hearts, for the one who called us to the table calls us to sing and dance. Teach us the music, guide us in the footsteps, empower us to join in the celebration and invite all we see to do the same.

As we gather around this table, we bring with us our concerns, our hopes, our fears, our prayers ... Those we can name and those we offer with sighs too deep for words.

We lift before you those who need healing, those who grieve, those who are without jobs or without homes, those who seek refuge or respite.

This Independence Day weekend, we pray for our nation. We give thanks for this country in which we can worship you freely, and commend this land and its people to your merciful care. We pray for our leaders, that you may give them wisdom and understanding; we pray for all who call this country 'home,' that they may experience the justice and peace you intend. Send us out from this table, to be a blessing to our neighbors near and far as we work always for your glory.

Through Christ, with Christ, in Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit, may all glory and honor be yours, O Lord of the Dance, who taught us to pray by saying, **Our Father...**