



WORLD MISSIONS SUNDAY

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Sunday, January 31, 2010

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Lection – Psalm 67 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v.1) May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face to shine upon us, Selah (v.2) that your way may be known upon earth, your saving power among all nations. (v.3) Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you. (v.4) Let the nations be glad and sing for joy, for you judge the peoples with equity and guide the nations upon earth. Selah. (v.5) Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you. (v.6) The earth has yielded its increase; God, our God, has blessed us. (v.7) May God continue to bless us; let all the ends of the earth revere him.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

African American congregations can and do join the broadly ecumenical recognition of a ministry in and beyond the local community. We believe, as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, we are all “caught in an inescapable web of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly.” Because of this web, on this Sunday, African American churches emphasize not only the local environs, but the global nations of the world by stressing world missions.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Psalm 67

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

My own life and ministry have been deeply immersed in ecumenical and interfaith work that is responsive to Jesus’ prayer “...that they may all be one” (John 17:21). Jesus came to liberate the world, not just me and my kind. A mature Christianity looks at the local scene, as well as beyond it to the global, and deeply and profoundly believes that all of humanity is created in the image of God, not just the people of any one race, nation, culture, or religion. There is one faith, one Lord, one baptism, and one family of God spread across the entire face of the earth.

Worldwide, 3.6 billion people “live on less than \$520 per year.”¹ That is 60% of humanity. Moreover, one hundred fifty million children are malnourished. Ten million children under five die each year. Thirty million people are infected with HIV/AIDS. Global warming affects us all, and the violence that engulfs the whole world is surely related to a deep spiritual hunger that we have been unable to satisfy. Surely the church of Jesus Christ has something to say and to do in the name of Jesus at such a time as this.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

Similar to Psalms 65, 118, and 124, Psalm 67 is very likely a national hymn of thanksgiving that may have been used at the beginning of the Hebrew New Year. In seven short verses, the Psalm invokes praise for God and a call for universal worship.

Invoking the grace of God, the Psalm begins with a blessing that corresponds closely to the blessing God told Moses to give to Aaron and his sons in Numbers 6:24-26. A version of this blessing is often used in African American worship: “May 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.” This prayer/benediction (v. 1) is among the most well known and often repeated verses in all of scripture. There is one striking and significant difference, however, between it and Numbers 6:24-26. The Aaronic blessing in Numbers is individual in nature, and the blessing desired in Psalm 67 is both communal and universal in nature. The prayer is that God will be gracious, not just to “me” but to *us*; and that God’s face will shine upon, not just “me” but on *us*; and that God’s “way” may be known upon the whole earth, and that God’s saving power may be known among *all* nations (v.2). The universal nature of the blessings desired in Psalm 67 makes clear that World Mission work is still part of the task of the Church in America.

In addition, the notion of God’s face shining upon us is noteworthy; God does not turn away from us, but acknowledges us. The divine light shines, and God’s way is made visible to us; we are invited upon a dynamic journey led by the light of God shining upon us. This is the guide we need to travel the globe to avail ourselves of the endless opportunities to spread the love of God and the compassion of God. By grace, we journey in the fuller context of God’s way in the world. God is not distant from us but near to us along our journey. The question is will we make the journey or will we remain confined to our local conclaves of prayer and worship?

Verses 3 and 5 invite the praise of God from all people everywhere. They are a joyful refrain of praise to a just God who cares for all of humanity created in the very image of God. They call a world to joyful thanksgiving for the gifts of God that ought to be shared by all. They anticipate just such a celebration in this lifetime not just the hereafter. The issue that faces us is how we are carrying out the mandates of God around the world so that the gifts of God are shared by all. How are our denominations and our churches standing as God’s representatives globally? No, it is not likely that all churches will make mission trips to distant lands. However, it is possible for every church to do world mission work through linkages to national and denominational entities that do such work. Again, the question is will we make the journey or will we remain confined to our local conclaves of prayer and worship?

God is due praise, because God is just and equitable to humanity (v.4). God's guidance is universal, not particular to any one nation or people. All the nations of the earth may take comfort in the impartiality of God, in the favor of God toward all of God's people. There are parallels to this theological affirmation in stories in both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament (e.g. Jonah 4:1-11 and Acts 10:9-35). A legitimate question for today concerns whether this is just a hoped for ideal without real correspondence to the terrible inequities that exist among the nations and peoples in our world. Just two nations, the Sudan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, have between them 7.5 million internally displaced persons out of an estimated 25 million such persons worldwide.² How will these people know the favor of God without our hands, feet and wallets? How will they view those of us who claim great love for God and stalwart belief in God's church yet stand still as the world outside this country convulses during one hellish nightmare after another?

As we launch out into the world, spreading the blessings that God has so generously bestowed upon us (v. 7), we will see that life still provides occasions for thanksgiving even in the face of the harsh realities in the world. The bounty of the earth joyfully compels thanksgiving at the goodness of God. One of the aims of mission work is to declare that God is indeed good. This Psalm reminds us that our life is wholly sustained by the fruit of the earth, the harvest of God's creation. Our common dependence on the bounty of the earth suggests that reverence for God rightfully extends to the ends of the whole earth, the nations of the world.

Celebration

The world is our home created by our just and loving God to nurture and sustain us. Psalm 67 gives us joyful language to praise God for creation and to join all the nations and peoples of the world in unending thanksgiving and praise. There are glaring inequities in the conditions of nations and peoples but this encourages us to reaffirm our common humanity and to seek justice and a decent life for all in thanksgiving to a God whose face shines upon us all.

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details of Psalm 67 include:

Sights: The light of God's face shining upon us (v. 1); the image of God as a guide and as a judge (v. 4); the image of many people the world over celebrating a just and loving God (vv. 3, 5);

Sounds: The shouts and songs of people praising God (vv. 3, 5); the "sound" of silent reverence for God (v. 7); and

Smells: The aromas of the harvest as it moves from the threshing field to a kitchen.

III. Additional Material That Preachers and Others Can Use

- ❖ In the context of an interfaith, intercultural world of startling plurality, what might it mean for the whole world of nations to join in the acclamation “let all the peoples praise you.” “Finally, for Black Christians, the search for an expression of the Apostolic faith must be multiracial and multicultural rather than captive to any one race, sex, class or political ideology...The faith once delivered to the apostles by Jesus Christ is for the whole world and must be capable of being transmitted and responded to by all.”³
- ❖ “Human beings cannot live by the produce of the earth alone. They must hear the word of God. In the constant tension between these two needs is hidden humanity’s peculiar dignity and tragedy. Buddhists would readily acknowledge that they need the produce of the earth and every word that comes from the mouth of the Awakened One. Similarly, Taoists would say that they need the produce of the earth and every word that comes from the Ultimate Tao. The great religious traditions of the world, without exception, have described the relationship between bread (the earth’s produce) and the word of God, because they are keenly aware of the tragic pull of earthly greed. Jesus asks, ‘What benefit is it to anyone to win the whole world and forfeit or lose his very self?’”⁴
- ❖ It might be useful to reflect upon the often used phrase “God Bless America” in light of the universal emphasis of Psalm 67: 2—“that your way may be known upon earth, your saving power among all nations.”
- ❖ In a world in which fundamentalist perspectives are exercising tremendous and dangerous influence, whether Christian, Muslim or Zionist, it may be well to consider that God’s first covenant with humankind, the covenant with Noah that is our text for today “...precedes the selection of one group to be ‘God’s own people’ and is for *all* creation and *all* humanity, for *all* time. In the biblical view...there was a universal covenant before there was a particular relationship with Israel.”⁵

Notes

1. See Merkel, Jim. Radical Simplicity: Small Footprints on a Finite Earth. Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers, 2003.
2. See UNHCR. The State of The World's Refugees 2006: Human Displacement in the New Millennium. UNHCR's Division of External Relations. April 2006.
3. Shannon, David T., and Gayraud S. Wilmore. Black Witness to the Apostolic Faith. Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co. for Commission on Faith and Order, National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., 1988. p.69.
4. Koyama, Kosuke. “May God Continue to Bless Us.” The Christian Century. 26 Apr. 1989: 442.
5. Campbell, Cynthia. A Multitude of Blessings: A Christian Approach to Religious Diversity. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2007.