

One Nation Under (7July19)
Psalm 66:1-9 plus 10 & 12

*“O beautiful for heroes proved
In liberating strife,
Who more than self their country
loved
And mercy more than life!
America! America!
May God thy gold refine,
Till all success be nobleness,
And ev’ry gain divine!”* (ELW 888, st2)

Maybe some of our Psalm is in there, with God’s national concern and trials by fire. This Psalm has a verse about purifying silver; the song ups the ante with gold. I’d highlight the distinction that it singles out heroes and may end up misplacing the glory and adoration and worship, where the Psalm will attribute the good only from God, and for the common good.

We probably don’t need an exclusivist view that says we’re better than everyone else or that imagines we’re closer to God. When we read the Psalm in our more honest moments, we may even see not just others—other nations, other religions, other people—as the rebels and enemies of God, but see where our own country rebels against God’s will and we ourselves go astray.

Maybe to move closer to our Psalm’s theology, and for speaking of our nation, here’s a new verse I heard last week on WPR’s *Simply Folk*, written by Noel Paul Stookey, of Peter, Paul and Mary:

*“Oh, nation of the immigrant
The slave and native son
Whose loyal families labor still
That we may live as one
America, America
Renew thy founder’s call
Let liberty and justice be
The right of one and all”*

That may feel more like us here, that it’s about justice and we’re working toward some sort of equity and equality, working to right former wrongs.

Still, compared with the faith of our Psalm, in that new verse God has disappeared from the scene. The focus is on us and on what we do.

As we’re considering this, we should notice that this Psalm is very, very specific. It specifies that God is the one doing it and specifies that God did it for someone else, one nation. You may have picked up hints of the Exodus story. We can’t claim special privilege or place. The specificity is not transposable to our own country. If we hear this as glorifying God’s connection to and work in a chosen people, it’s not appropriate for us to appropriate that biblical narrative and shoehorn in the United States of America.

While this may not be about the U.S. (nor is it about modern Israel), neither do we need to feel left out. We may hear echoes of our stories, echoes that resound in the hymn text, “God of our weary years, God of our silent tears, thou who has brought us thus far on the way...keep us forever in the path, we pray” (ELW 841).

Further, this specificity is precisely meant to draw us all in. It portrays freedom from slavery in Egypt and going through the Red Sea, being brought into the Promised Land. But those details within the Psalm aren’t isolationist history or restrictive in favoritism. They certainly aren’t for gloating, either in solitary contentment or against the misfortune of others. The added verse reminds us that this isn’t about everything going great all the time or being singled out in God’s blessing when curses fall on others.

Rather than glorying in heroes of war or military might or economic clout or alleged moral superiority or bluer skies than other countries, as if we should or could claim credit in those things, this Psalm instead invites the praise of all nations, not a single national anthem but songs of praise, and indeed for all the world to shout with some kind of joyful noise. The end of the previous Psalm envisions the expanse we also witness in gardens and prairies here and farm fields around us. It says: “The pastures of the wilderness overflow, the hills gird themselves with joy, the meadows clothe themselves with flocks, the valleys deck themselves with grain, they shout

and sing together for joy.” That leads straight in to our start: “Make a joyful noise to God, all earth.”

Through a specific lens, all are invited into the praise. And that seems what the Psalm wants us to know.

Plenty is not explained. It doesn't say how God's blessings are allotted or doled out, or even maybe what those blessings are or aren't. It doesn't say how God chooses or why. It doesn't elaborate why bad things happen or how to rectify and reconcile when it feels you're on the losing end. Maybe most troubling for us, it doesn't offer any other agency. It doesn't tell us what our responsibilities are or what we're responsible for, versus what is dumb luck or what science might explain. The only credit the Psalm is willing to attribute is to God.

And our response still now, even for old stories that were far removed from us or our ancestors, is to join in making joyful noise.

Maybe we can think of the Psalm as an invitation to a party. When you're invited to a party, it doesn't involve explanations. It's not suggesting alternatives. It's not primarily about what you need to bring or do. It's not really how you feel about it or how much you would've planned it that way. Instead, it's graciously including you, asking you to share in the celebration.

Now, we could obviously see our response of praise and joyful noise as singing here in church. All are welcome in worship because from here God's invitation extends without bounds. And the joyful noises don't presume musical ability. I'll say again I'm glad you came today to join in the celebration, you RSVP'd "yes." Thank you.

But this is far, far from the only way. Beyond this, we might ponder how our whole lives sing and shout praise first to God, not seeking credit for ourselves, not gloating in our nation, not consumed by explanations, not lost in the negatives. How do we gird ourselves with overflowing joy? How do your days embody a reminder of God's goodness?

There are zillions of possibilities. It might be that fireworks are a joyful noise, celebrating

God's blessings of life. It might be that splashing in water does it, or conversations that seek understanding. It might be as we turn our eyes to spacious skies. It might be in barbecues or brunch. As it says in the New Testament, “whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God” (1Cor10:31).

Since this is about nations and our nation, it also quickly gets political. Praise and politics may be an unusual pairing of words these days. Since we're recognizing the gift Ellen Lindgren has been to us in so many ways through the years, we can also celebrate how she's come to the party, and how she's brought us along with her. Ellen is certainly political, on her shirtsleeve and in signs she carries and through so many hours of her day. As we praise God, we can also give thanks for Ellen, who has worked so diligently for justice, for a politics that is about how life is enhanced and welcome is extended, so that more people may receive this invitation for an opportunity of abundant life, when living is itself praise of God.

Thank you, Ellen. Thank you all for being here. Thank you for the ways you expand praise and let your lives sing. And finally, thanks be to God.