**Psalm 147:1-11**

INTRODUCTION

Psalm 147 may simply look like another innocuous ‘praise’ psalm, starting and ending with *“1 Hallelujah...”* as so many other Psalms in this genre do; *“…How good it is to sing praises to the Living God, who is gracious…”* It sounds like a clear and definite pronouncement of who God is, what God does, and why we should worship them. There is not a single question or “what if.” This psalmist is not asking for our opinion, he’s not expressing wishful thinking.

But in preparation for this morning my attention, and perhaps yours, was drawn to verses that spoke about Jerusalem and Israel not the openings and closing words of praise. I couldn’t help but get hung up on how our ancient scriptures, so often poetic and metaphorical in nature, are used to justify present-day actions and attitudes. Actions and attitudes that ultimately have real consequences in our world. Beloved, as we walk through this Psalm today and we close out another Epiphany season, we would do well to remember the power of the words we find in this text, weight of interpretative responsibility that we have in our time and place. Let us pray that we would be open to Divine wisdom today:

*Write out the prayer.*

QUESTIONING VERSE 2

*“1 Hallelujah! How good it is to sing praises to the Living God, who is gracious; and a song of praise is fitting.2 The Architect of Heaven rebuilds Jerusalem and gathers the outcasts of Israel.”* Here that one more time: “*The Architect of Heaven rebuilds Jerusalem and gathers the outcasts of Israel.”* Friends, if you have listened or watched any news reports since the Hamas attack on October 7, 2023 you have heard and absorbed numerous data-points about the conflict in Israel and Palestine. We all know, at least intellectually that the information we receive likely has a particular slant, a bias, sets of assumptions about the actors on the ground, about who is right and who is wrong, what actions are justifiable and those that are not.

Then we have certain traditions within our own faith, American Christianity, that without reservation quote scripture, this text [hold up the Bible], to justify policies and actions that contribute to atrocious outcomes. That prolong human suffering, prop up tyrants and resource destruction.

And I don’t know about you, but as this conflict continues into this 4th month, and as the images of wounded children, and cities in rumble fill my screens, and the numbers of hostages, of deaths, of displacements and flattened hospitals populate my mind…I can’t help but read these words, *The Architect of Heaven rebuilds Jerusalem and gathers the outcasts of Israel* and be left with nothing but questions:

* How will Jerusalem be rebuilt? And when?
* Who will be welcome in a rebuilt Jerusalem?
* Is this Psalm even talking about the physical city of Jerusalem we know?
* Or isn’t there a heavenly Jerusalem that scripture refers to, and might this text be talking about that?
* Nevertheless, who will be able to call this Jerusalem home? Who will be included and who will be excluded? Who will be safe and whose life will be a risk?
* And what about these outcasts? Who are the ‘outcasts of Israel’? Are they Israeli or Palestinian? Are they of this or that faith? Are they Jewish or Muslim, maybe Christian or something else?
* Might the ‘Israel’ in our Psalm different than the ‘Israel’ in our news?

You see, our Psalmist might not have any questions, but I do!

LINK

Having questions about declarative statements in scripture about God’s actions and God’s will, are crucial to the thinking Christian. And such critical engagement of, not just the Bible, but any strongly held beliefs, are an essential part of what it means to be a member of the United Church of Christ. So, in the spirit of this tradition, you may be thinking, “This is a praise psalm. Why are you talking about war?” In response, I would like to hone in on a seemingly out of place verse, verse 10.

QUESIONING VERSE 10

*10“God takes no delight in the strength of horse, not pleasure in the speed of a runner.”* Now, folks, this is Louisville, Kentucky, and I as an outside may not have memorable the weekend that the derby happens every year, which is \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_? But you cannot tell me that horses don’t make God happy????

But, ancient times, horses were not raced in sport, or commonly used in agriculture. Instead, they were mainly used for warfare. During battles, horses were a significant source of fear for foot soldiers because of their ability to trample down anything that came their way. They could rapidly break through the enemy's lines and bring deadly weapons up close.

And this odd verse, doesn’t just mention God’s dissatisfaction with horses, the Psalmist says God also takes no “pleasure in the speed of a runner,” another transition says, “a human’s thighs,” (which I take personal offense in) still another offers “the legs of a warrior.”

In the ancient world marathon/long-distance runners would be tasked with delivering messages to locations that were remote or inaccessible to horses. These runners would be tasked with heralding news of war…of wins and losses, of incoming threats or to request reinforcements. In the mountainous areas of Greece, a human messenger could keep pace with or even exceed that of a horse messenger. When it came to whole armies, any march over four days could exceed the rate of mounted troops over the same ground.

Pretty impressive by my reckoning, but our Psalmists states, that God does not find such strategies impressive. And why?

Might the answer be so simple as – God does not delight in war. And if God takes no delight in war, nor the instruments or strategies of war, then there is no such thing as a holy war or a just war.

LINK

* So even as Jerusalem is far from rebuilt, and the cities of Gaza lie in ruins, and the outcasts are being captured and killed,
* And we agree with our Psalmist that God does not delight in or take pleasure in war-games and clever military strategies.
* What then, is the Good News in this Psalm? How robust is our praise when wars continue?
* What insights/revelations/epiphanies does this ancient text have for us today?

INTERPRETATION

Well let’s look at the rest of the text.

* All the way back in verse 1, the *“[Living] God is gracious,”* meaning God is an infinite source of goodwill, that God holds all human beings in free and unmerited favor. In this, God does not choose sides.
* Verse 3, *“God heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds.”* Here, I see God in the humanitarian actions of non-profits such as Doctors Without Borders and the Red Cross – God provides care and healing to all who need it, ALL who need it.
* God cares deeply for humans enough that all of creation serves as a mechanism of God’s love and care for ALL. As the gospel says: *“Our Father in heaven makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous”* (Matthew 5:45).
* *“God determines the number of stars and gives them names, abundant in power and with understanding beyond measure.”* God can hold ALL of this at once, God can see aspects of life and of conflict in ways that boggle our human minds. When we only see fault and blame, God sees more deeply. AND YET…
* *“The Faithful One lifts up the oppressed and casts down the corrupt.”* God’s goodwill is for all, God’s care and provision and healing is for all, AND YET there are still forces acting with the will of God and those in opposition. There are still people acting out of corruption, and people suffering oppression. And to do God’s will means we must stand up against corruption and to continually opt for and advocate for the oppressed.

CONCLUSION

Friends, I still see this Psalm as a song of praise.

* It is good and right to praise our gracious, healing, giving God.
* It is good and right to praise God who wants unity and wholeness for all people.
* And it is good and right to praise God by taking no delight in war, by taking no delight in the machines of war, nor the outcomes.

May we continually praise our gracious, healing, giving God by seeking at all time to do the peace-loving work of God – lifting up the oppressed and casting out corruption. I don’t think we are capable of looking at this presence conflict as God does, but frankly I don’t think that’s our job.

Our job is to rely upon God’s vision of hope and wholeness, of unity and peace and to take action to further those aims. We are to express joy and awe in worshipping a deity that can see much deeper and more clearly than we can ever hope to. Giving praise to a God who is not some far off power, but who delights in acts of justice and takes pleasure in those working for peace. Amen.