

Pentecost 11, Proper 16, Year A, 2014
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
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At first glance
today's psalm
sounds very much like psalm one hundred five, the psalm that we have read
over a number of weeks.

Because like psalm one hundred five,
it turns to the great stories of the Old Testament
as reminders
of God's work
and God's blessing,
reminders to the people
to give thanks.

And it covers much the same territory as psalm one hundred twenty four, that we read three
weeks ago,
another reflection on the story of the crossing of the Red Sea,
which we read his morning as our Old Testament reading.

That time, the psalmist's focus was on the people's experience
of God having been on their side,
God having been present
even when things looked their worst, when it seemed
that there was no way out
and they would die there in the desert, trapped between
the Egyptian soldiers
and the sea.

This
is another reflection
on those same events.
But this time
the emphasis is different.
This time, it's not so much asking an existential question -
is God on our side? -
as making a theological claim, a claim
about God.

And that claim
is absolutely
astounding.

When we first read the psalm
it seems like a simple celebration.

And so it begins.
“ Hallelujah! When Israel came out of Egypt,
the house of Jacob from a people of strange speech...”
Clearly this
is a celebration
of what happened
when the people of God
escaped from Egypt,
what we know today
as the Exodus.

And it seems to keep going on the same theme.

“Judah became God's sanctuary
and Israel his dominion.
The sea beheld it and fled;
Jordan turned and went back.
The mountains skipped like rams,
and the little hills like young sheep.”

And immediately we think
of the story of the people of God at the Red Sea,
stuck between the water
and the armies of Pharaoh.
And Moses stretching out his arm,
and the sea dividing, receding,
so that the people could pass through safely.

And perhaps we remember another story,
at the other end
of the people's
pilgrimage,
as they came close
to the promised land
and found their way blocked
by the River Jordan.
And again God acted,
and again the water divided, receded,
and the people passed through

safely.

Or perhaps we think of the awe of Mount Sinai,
 where Moses went
 to receive the ten commandments,
 midway through
 their journey from slavery to freedom,
 the mountain shaking and rumbling with the thunder and lightning
 of God.

But then the psalm asks
 “What ailed you, O sea, that you fled?
 O Jordan, that you turned back?
 You mountains, that you skipped like rams?
 you little hills like young sheep?”
 what was it
 that made nature turn
 against nature,
 that made seas and rivers and mountains
 defy
 the laws of nature?

The psalmists answer is immediate.
 “Tremble, O earth, at the presence of the Lord, *
 at the presence of the God of Jacob
 Who turned the hard rock into a pool of water *
 and flint-stone into a flowing spring.”

It is God who has done this,
 the same God
 who when the people of God
 were in the desert
 and afraid that they would die
 of thirst,
 God who commanded
 Moses to hit a rock with his stick,
 and fresh drinking water
 ran out.
 This is the one
 who breaks the laws of nature,
 this is the one

who has done great things
and is worthy of our worship.
Hallelujah!

Except,
except
that's not
the whole story.

Because we skipped over
something important.
Remember verse three?
It says,
"The sea beheld it and fled."
What is the 'it'
that the sea
beheld?
What made the sea flee?

The easy answer
is to skip ahead to verse seven.
"The presence of God," we answer.
But as the psalm reads
the answer
is actually in
verse two.
"Judah became God's sanctuary
and Israel his dominion."
It's not just the presence of God.
It's the presence of God
in Judah
and Israel.

So what does that mean?
It you google Israel and Judah,
the top hit
will be a wikipedia article
about the adjoining
iron age kingdoms.
Centuries after the events of the Exodus,
when the people had been settled in the promised land
for generations,
they had a king,

David,
 and the whole country
 was united.
 Then came disagreements and wars and invasions.
 And the promised land was divided,
 Judah
 in the south,
 and Israel
 in the north.
 So, the presence of God
 in Judah and Israel, the presence of God
 in the promised
 land?
 Is that what the sea beheld
 and fled?

No, of course not.
 It makes no geographic sense -
 the holy land
 is nowhere near
 the Red Sea -
 and it's anachronistic
 into the bargain.

“Judah became God's sanctuary
 and Israel his dominion.”

So what else
 could this mean?

We could go back to the original names.
 Israel - the name given to the patriarch Jacob
 after he wrestled with God
 at the ford of Jabbok,
 the place he renamed Penuel,
 the face of God,
 the place where God renamed him
 Israel,
 one who perseveres
 with God.

And Judah, the fourth of the twelve sons of Jacob,
 but the one who became the leader,

whose name literally meant
"thanksgiving" or "praise."

Are Jacob and Judah
the ones that the sea beheld
and fled?

No, that makes no sense either,
because by the time that the people of God escaped from Egypt,
Jacob and Judah
were long dead.
We have to look deeper.

"Judah became God's sanctuary
and Israel his dominion."

There's another meaning
here. The descendants of Israel
become known as the Israelites,
twelve tribes of them
descendent of the twelve sons
of Jacob.

And among them Judah, the leader of the brothers,
and it was from him
that King David
was descended,
who established Jerusalem,
the great city
where the temple was built
and God was known
to be.

Israel and Judah,
The people of God, the Israelites,
and the people who would set aside
the holy place of God,
people of perseverance
and people of praise,

they became
God's sanctuary and dominion.

The sea beheld it and fled -
the sea beheld

in this motley, exhausted, complaining
people of God,
the almighty presence and power of God.

And all that is a complicated way of saying
that the astounding claim of this psalm
is that the God
who can cause seas and rivers to divide and recede,
the God who can make mountains shake,
the God who commands all nature
makes his sanctuary, his holy place
among his people.
They
are the dwelling place of God.

But that's not the end of the story.
Leap forward
a few hundred, a thousand or more
years
and we hear the same thing.

Back in the middle of summer, we read these words from the letter to the Romans:
"You are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you." (Rom 8:9)
It's a theme that the apostle Paul returns to time and time again,
In his first letter to the Corinthians, he writes,
Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?" (1 Corinthians
3.16)
and again in Ephesians,
"You are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the
foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the
whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also
are built together spiritually into a dwelling-place for God." (Ephesians 2:19b-22)

The people of God in the Old Testament
were the sanctuary, the dwelling place of God,
and the whole of nature could see it and respond.
We too,
as followers of Christ,
in whom God came to live among us,
we are the sanctuary
the dwelling place of God
through the Holy Spirit.

And what that means,
what that means
in the language of our reading from Romans today, we belong
to God.
God lives in us
and we live
for God.

The God who created all things,
who has power over all nature,
that God
lives in us!
Isn't that astounding?

And because God lives in us
we're called to live up to that.
That's the point of the Romans reading today.
We are to live up
to God.

And remember how Paul described that,
back in chapter 12?
To let love be genuine;
to hate what is evil,
to hold fast to what is good;
to love one another with mutual affection;
to outdo one another in showing honour.
To not lag in zeal,
to be ardent in spirit,
to serve the Lord.
To rejoice in hope,
to be patient in suffering,
to persevere in prayer.
To contribute to the needs of the saints;
to extend hospitality to strangers.

That's what it means
to live up to God
who lives in us.

And of course
we'll make mistakes,
of course

we'll fail,
but we have God
living in us
and that makes everything possible.
If only
we're willing
to take the risk
and do what God calls us to.

God lives in us.
We live in God.
Hallelujah.