

Pentecost 16, Proper 19, Year A, 2014
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
The Rev. Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley

Today is the last time for a while
that you have to hear a sermon on the psalms.

Next week

we begin a six week series focussing on the gospel readings and the theme
“Walking the Way”
which is the focus of our stewardship season this year.

But for today

we’re still with the psalms,
and in particular

Psalm 78.

And you probably noticed that it sounds familiar -
not because we’ve read it before this year,
but because it carries on the theme that we’ve heard repeated time and time again,
the wonderful acts of God
in leading the Israelites out of Egypt and through the wilderness
into the promised land.

And you might also have noticed
that each one of these psalms
has a slightly different emphasis,
in each one, the recitation of the acts of God
is used to support
a different focus.

There was the question of Psalm 124,
“Is God on our side?”

Psalm 105,

“Give thanks to the Lord,”

and now Psalm 78

recounting the deeds and power of God.

If you were to look in a bible in Hebrew, you would discover
that our psalm today, Psalm 78,

begins with a superscription,
a note

describing it as a maskil
of Asaph.

A maskil

was a teaching song -
 a song where the music helps you remember
 that is being taught.

We have them too. I suspect many of us learned our ABCs with this song:
 ABCDEFG...

And there are counting songs as well,
 like Five little ducks.

The animals went in two by two, Hurrah! Hurrah!
 The elephant and the kangaroo, Hurrah! Hurrah!
 The animals went in two by two,
 The elephant and the kangaroo,
 And they all went in-to the Ark for to get out of the rain,
 And they all went in-to the Ark for to get out of the rain.

And of course, it's not only children who benefit from teaching songs.
 Our hymns function as teaching songs too.
 Think about something like "The God of Abrahams' praise"

Or today's opening hymn, Praise my soul the King of heaven,
 which reminds us who God is:
 King of heaven, slow to chide and swift to bless, father-like, gentle,
 and reminds us that we are ransomed, healed, restored, and forgiven.

So, back to the psalm,
 this is a teaching song, a song that reminds the people
 of how God has worked among them.
 There are sixty four verses that tell the story of the people of God
 and the God who has led them and cared for them
 from the time of the Exodus
 all the way through
 to the kingship of David.

But it's the first eight verses
 that focus the psalm.

You might want to turn to them in the Book of Common Prayer on page 694 and follow along,
 since our lectionary only had us read the first four. Page 694.

- 1 Hear my teaching, O my people; *
 incline your ears to the words of my mouth.
- 2 I will open my mouth in a parable; *
 I will declare the mysteries of ancient times.

- 3 That which we have heard and known,
and what our forefathers have told us, *
we will not hide from their children.
- 4 We will recount to generations to come
the praiseworthy deeds and the power of the Lord, *
and the wonderful works he has done.
- 5 He gave his decrees to Jacob
and established a law for Israel, *
which he commanded them to teach their children;
- 6 That the generations to come might know, and the
children yet unborn; *
that they in their turn might tell it to their children;
- 7 So that they might put their trust in God, *
and not forget the deeds of God,
but keep his commandments;
- 8 And not be like their forefathers,
a stubborn and rebellious generation, *
a generation whose heart was not steadfast,
and whose spirit was not faithful to God.

It is these eight verses
that make the purpose of the psalm clear.
It is a psalm to be sung
again and again
to make sure that each new generation
comes to know
the power and goodness of God
and learns to put their trust
in him.

The obvious connection with our lives today
is the importance of us teaching our children and grandchildren
about God,
something most of you have heard me preach on before.

But today I want us to think a little more broadly.

Remember that superscription that begins the psalm?
A Maskil of Asaph.
Maskil means teaching song.
But who is Asaph?
Well, according to the experts,
Asaph was one of the temple musicians

in the time of King David and King Solomon.

So let's think of who this psalm
was originally for.

Israel was a small kingdom,
defined by ties of blood
and religion.

Each person
belonged to a family,
and each family to a tribe,
and each tribe - and there were twelve of them -
had their own geographic region.

So you knew where you belonged
and who you belonged to.

And as well as sharing a family
you all shared
the same faith.

You didn't have much contact with people outside your tribe
except when you went up to Jerusalem
for the high holy days,
and even those people
were related to you by blood,
going back to the time of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob.

You learned everything you needed to know
from your family
and that included your faith,
which was highly structured.

Everyone
kept the Sabbath.

Everyone
followed the food laws.

Everyone prayed.

To neglect your faith
was to reject your family.

And so it was of prime importance
that people taught their children and grandchildren
their faith.

But we live in a different world.

Our families are scattered,
across Long Island, across the country, across the world.

We might not even know our neighbors.

We live in a culture of many faiths, and no faith at all.

And religious practice is often seen
as an optional
extra.

And while in the culture of King David's time
the most important thing was to teach your children,
when Jesus came
things changed.
Because this was something new, this good news of God in Christ.
It wasn't just something that you inherited from your parents.
You had to find out about Christ
from someone
who had heard his message.
It was passed along
person to person,
from friends
and acquaintances
and even
by rumor.

That's why it was so important that the disciples be sent out to tell others,
because the good news of Christ
wasn't going to happen
simply by being passed down in families.
Just think how that would have been:
twelve disciples,
eleven after Judas left,
and even if they were all married
and each had ten children
that would be a grand total
of a hundred twenty followers of Christ
in the first generation.
Instead
as the book of Acts reminds us
within a couple of months of his resurrection
the followers of Jesus
numbered thousands!
Because people had simply
told their friends.
"Hey, we heard this guy talking over in the marketplace.
You should come hear him!"

The world still needs us to do that.

There are plenty of people
who haven't heard the good news.
Perhaps, like many in my generation
your parents wanted them to make up their own minds about religion
but didn't give them any experience of religion at all -
so they weren't equipped to choose.
Perhaps
they had a bad experience of church in the past
and that put them off.
Perhaps they'd heard
a distorted
form of the gospel.

All those people
need to hear the good news of God in Christ,
They need to know that God loves us
and cares for us,
and does amazing things in our lives.
And we - we all, not just the clergy -
we need
to tell them.

We often think
that people won't be open
if we talk with them about faith.
That they'll see us as pushy.
But you might be surprised.
But of course, telling other people only works
if we ourselves are convinced.

We need to constantly remind ourselves
of our faith in God.
Because if we don't keep on reminding ourselves
of the wonderful things that God has done,
we will all too easily
begin to forget.

Those of you
who have spent time away from the church during your life
will know how that is:
it starts
by missing church occasionally.
Then

you feel less connected
so you come even less often.
Until you don't feel any connection at all.
There's a reason that people talk about
drifting away.

But when you return
you rediscover the importance of community.
You rediscover the power of habits.
And you rediscover
the goodness and grace of God.

Reading scripture together,
singing hymns,
praying together
connects us with each other
and with God.
Being here every Sunday,
participating in bible studies,
praying faithfully as members of the prayer chain,
taking every opportunity to grow in our faith and dependence on God,
all these
strengthen our faith
and our trust in God.
And more than that,
they bring us the greatest gift:
the experience of the presence
of God in our lives,
just as Christ
promised.