

Before we open the scriptures today, I want to thank the good people who attended Wednesday's Bible study. I know many of you work and cannot make it to a weekday morning activity, and I apologize. I know you deserve the opportunity to have Bible study at church, too, and I'm working on that. I promise.

In fact, the folks who came on Wednesday are very wise and had great insight, and half of them said that they had led Bible study in some capacity before. So, I know there is a real possibility that we can grow our adult ed opportunities in the near future.

But let's get to the psalm. This piece is what is called an "enthronement psalm." But it's not the enthronement of an earthly king. It's a celebration of Almighty God – the king of kings, the creator, the God of Abraham, Moses, and David.

And it begins with a call to worship. "O come, let us sing to the Lord; let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation! ²Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving; let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise!"

This is a celebratory moment. An invitation to a glorious event.

Dr. Bill Bellinger, who I've quoted now three weeks in a row, says that our NRSV translation (which is what we use the most) is "probably too tame for the Hebrew verbs that call for shouting and singing aloud, a noisy shout of homage similar to the shouting at the entrance of a human king." Imagine the noise level when the home team takes the field or the court and the whole stadium erupts. Imagine the moment when a performer appears on stage in front of 65,000 people and the whole place screams in unison.

Bellinger continues, "The call is for a procession to worship with this joyful singing. The movement is to the outer courts and then toward the sanctuary, the holy place of worship and the place of divine presence."

So, imagine that you are outside the sanctuary. In the fellowship hall, perhaps, or the parking lot, and you heard over the speakers, "Come! Let us sing to the Lord! Let us

make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!” and with that, the organ notes reverberate through the air. The cymbals crash, the tympany is pounding, and the bells are tolling. The choir, as one, belts out the first lines of a powerful piece of music, and you and everyone else are lifted emotionally and holler out in excitement, join in the singing, and make ready to process in to the sanctuary.

As you process, you hear the reasons why we worship God. Verses three through five say, “³For the Lord is a great God and a great King above all gods. ⁴In his hand are the depths of the earth; the heights of the mountains are his also. ⁵The sea is his, for he made it, and the dry land, which his hands have formed.”

You’re entering with praise. You’re entering with awe into the holy place. Remembering how great and powerful God is. You are moved by the high ceiling, the architecture. Your eyes are drawn to the candles and the table and the flowers. Your mind is present. Your heart is happy and full. Your voice is loud.

That’s the movement of verses one through five.

Then, in verse six, we are positioned for worship. Having made it to our pews, we are called to worship in a new way.

“⁶O come, let us worship and bow down; let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker! ⁷For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture and the sheep of his hand.”

Here, we are called into the moment of adoration. We fall on our knees and bow before our God, and in doing so, we’re not just in awe of the God of all creation. Now, in this moment, we are in awe that the God of all creation knows and cares for us personally. “We are the people of his pasture. The sheep of his hand.” That is incredibly intimate and moving. I fall on my knees in gratitude that Almighty God cares for little old me, for us.

We have entered into the sanctuary with praise on a cosmic scale and now we have expressed our gratitude and love to God for God’s personal care for us. We’ve had the prelude, the call to worship, the opening hymn and the prayer of adoration. But now . . . now the preacher gets up and starts spiting hellfire and brimstone.

“O that today you would listen to his voice! ⁸Do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah, as on the day at Massah in the wilderness.” Then the preacher begins speaking on behalf of God, from God’s perspective. ⁹your ancestors tested me and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work. ¹⁰For forty years I loathed that generation and said, “They are a people whose hearts go astray, and they do not regard my ways.” ¹¹Therefore in my anger I swore, “They shall not enter my rest.”

And that, friends, is how the psalm ends. Yuck. Many psalms start off sad and end up happy. There’s quite a few that do that. But this one does the opposite. We started off exuberant and ended up shell-shocked. It’s jarring the way it ends. Just eleven verses from raising the roof to God loathing a whole generation.

I think most of us would be content to just skip over the final part of the psalm, but, as usual, it’s the parts of the Bible that make me squirm that often teach me the most.

So, let’s take a closer look at the ominous warning. “O that today you would listen to his voice” actually gives me some encouragement. The speaker is imploring, begging, but there’s this confidence that if you listen, God will be speaking, and I like that. It’s not a question of whether or not God’s voice is going to be present. It will be. God does have something to say. And that’s good news. But then there’s a reference that the majority of us don’t understand. “Do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah, as on the day at Massah in the wilderness.” What happened at Meribah and Massah?

Well, that’s why we had the first reading today. We always read at least two scripture passages in church, and 99% of the time, they’re connected somehow. Today, it’s going to be more obvious.

Meribah and Massah were mentioned in the Exodus reading! In that story, God and Moses have already unleashed the ten plagues on the Egyptians. The Pharaoh has told the people to leave. They have set out across the desert. They have been chased by Pharaoh’s army when he changed his mind about letting them go. They have crossed the waters, and Pharaoh’s army has been washed away. God has even already started providing manna to them just one chapter before this.

But in our reading earlier, we heard these words. “²The people [the people who had seen all of the things I just mentioned happen. The people] quarreled with Moses and said, “Give us water to drink.” “Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?” ⁴So Moses cried out to the Lord, “What shall I do for this people? They are almost ready to stone me.” ⁵The Lord said to Moses, “take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile and go. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink.” Moses did so. ⁷He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the Lord, saying, “Is the Lord among us or not?” Massah means test and Meribah means quarrel.

So, in Psalm 95, there is a reference to the events of Exodus 17. Are you with me? The person speaking in the psalm is saying, “⁸Do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah, as on the day at Massah in the wilderness, ⁹when your ancestors tested me and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work.”

It sounds super harsh for the Israelites to test God after about 15 separate miracles, but when you think about it, we’ve all been there. We’ve been cheerful and open-hearted and ready to worship. We’ve named the ways we adore God, and we’ve thanked God for what God has done, but then we’ve quickly grumbled and complained with our next breath.

Yoda said that fear leads to anger and anger leads to hate. And that’s true for all of us. If my children were thirsty, and I did not know where to get them clean water, I’d be fearful, and easily angered, and frustrated. Fear, despite experiences of God’s provision, makes us tense and leads us to retreat in our hearts and minds to what we have known. For the Israelites, they knew Egypt. They knew the ever-flowing Nile River. Even though they had been slaves in Egypt. Even though they had just seen God act in ways that God had not acted since creation, their immediate fear hardened their hearts and made them lose faith and grumble at God.

And we’ve been there, too. We’ve praised God when life is going well. We’ve counted our blessings and sung praise in worship. But we’ve also snapped at God when a diagnosis has been made, a job has been lost, a check bounced, or a fight left you all alone. We’ve

witnessed incredible faithfulness from God and then grumbled and doubted God's presence when we've faced stress.

The psalmist is saying at the end of the psalm: *Don't repeat the pattern. Don't let fear make you forget who God is. Don't harden your heart. Keep it open, trusting, worshipping, remembering as you did earlier.*

Christians, God bless us, are not the most consistent people. Neither were the Israelites. We ride this roller coaster of faith and doubt, praise and complaining, selflessness and greed.

One of the clearest examples of worshipping and grumbling happens on Sunday afternoons all across the south. Down there, everyone goes to lunch after church, and every congregation wants to be the first ones done so they can be seated more quickly. At my previous church, worship began at 10:50 a.m., and when I asked why, the answer was, "starting ten minutes before 11 means we beat the Methodists to the Luby's every time."

But my friends who worked in restaurants all said that the worst shift of the week was Sunday lunch. The church-goers were the worst customers. They were so grumpy and snippy and tipped the least, even though they'd spent all morning praising God.

Or to put it another way . . . there are times when I've spoiled my children. On Friday, we went to Springfield and explored the science museum and the Dr. Seuss museum. I made them breakfast, packed them lunches and drinks of their choice, let them set the pace and agenda about where we went and what we did.

Later that day, when we got home. They took off their shoes, and suddenly it's "Mooooooooooooom, I'm so hungry. Mooooooooooooom, I'm so thirsty. Mooooooooooooom, why can't I stay up? It's not a school night."

I want to holler at them like the psalmist. Do you not remember how much I have done for you?!?! Do you not have a little gratitude and thankfulness in your heart?!?! Do you think I will let you starve or go thirsty after what you have seen me do for you today?!?!

But I know I've done the same thing to my parents, my loved ones, my God. Psalm 95 is essentially saying: Every generation has its Massah and Meribah moments. It's ok to let God know your needs and fears, but don't let fear harden your heart. Don't question God's presence or care for you when things are not going perfectly. Instead of growing tense and hard-hearted, continue to worship and remember what God has done.

So, I ask you, this week, to examine your own heart. Where are you holding fear or anger? What do you grumble about? Whether you grumble directly to God or grumble on Sundays after worshipping, see if there's a hard, tense spot in your heart, and if there is, breath, pray, love, and soften that spot with worship, gratitude, recommitment, and trust.

It turns out, Exodus 17 and Psalm 95 are intentionally linked, and when you hold them side by side the connection becomes a kind of spiritual X-ray: the psalmist is naming the deeper pattern beneath Israel's wilderness story of praise and doubt and is inviting worshipers to see themselves in the story, too.

If you do the work and find the places where there's tension and fear in your heart. If you make an effort to listen to God's voice and worship and let that spot grow softer, the reward is peace and rest. Peace and rest. It's absolutely worth the effort. Amen.