

People in Places Bearing Witness
Pentecost +8
Rev. Doug Floyd

During this extended time that we call Ordinary Time, we count each week in light of Pentecost, so on the bulletin, it says Pentecost +8 (eight Sundays after Pentecost). We will count time like this until the beginning of Advent.

This helps us meditate on this extended season of the church on mission. We read many of the readings through that lens. The church is on mission. We are living in light of Pentecost. We are going out as the people of God, proclaiming the good news. Of course, our Gospel reading today, the disciples are sent out to cast out demons, anoint the sick, proclaim the gospel of the kingdom.

Our texts today call attention to the witness of God's people. The disciples are sent out as witnesses of the kingdom. Amos bears witness to God's prophetic word to Israel. In Ephesians, Paul celebrates how the blessing of God overwhelms us in such a way that we become a witness of His blessing to the world. And our Psalmist sings about the witness of the people and the land to God's grace and goodness.

The idea of witness is simply part of being an image bearer. It's in our very nature to bear witness, not just of the things of God but of anything that occupies our focus.

We don't even think about it. Typically when I'm reading someone that I really like, I'll quote them all the time. Some people that were around me when all I was reading was GK Chesterton. I couldn't barely make a sentence without quoting GK Chesterton.

At the same time, if I eat a really good meal, I bear witness to it. That's our nature. We bear witness to everything that catches our attention. Not just good things but actually bad things. That's part of our difficulty in not complaining or gossiping is our very nature is to bear witness to how we're encountering this world.

In these texts today, as God is making his people and the land they live in a witness. I want to keep both those in our minds: the people and the land. In Psalm 85. the people and the land are intertwined and both reflect God's favor. Verse one remembers a time of God's blessing:

Lord, you were favorable to your land;
you restored the fortunes of Jacob.

This word favorable carries the sense of delight, love, and pleasure. Eugene Peterson translates it to say that the Lord smiled on the land. The land of Israel and the nation of Israel enjoyed God's favor, God's good pleasure. He covered the sins of the people. He forgave them their failures. He withdrew his wrath and showered them with lovingkindness.

The Psalmist remembers this time of love and good pleasure of the Lord, and asks God to remember as well:

⁴ Restore us again, O God of our salvation,
and put away your indignation toward us!

He asks God to reveal his love, to speak peace, bring his glory back to the land. Then the people will once again bear the image of God's love and the land will show its fruitfulness.

There is a sense in this Psalm that the people themselves turned away from God. When the people turn away from the Lord, they turn toward the gods of the surrounding lands. They turn toward the Baal's of the land.

The notion of Baal worship is very different than the worship of Yahweh because it's about power, and it's about manipulation. You have to stimulate your god to make him act. Part of Baal worship involves a great deal of sexual immorality. That's why adultery and idolatry are often bound together. Whenever you see the people that were caught up in idolatry, it means they're caught up in adultery because there are temple prostitutes waiting for you to somehow make the land fertile, which will stimulate the god to make the land fertile.

They also offer life to the Baal: human sacrifice. Instead of revealing the lovingkindness of God, the people reveal adultery, they spill the blood of the innocent both in human sacrifice and in other forms of human oppression. When the people turn from the Lord, they use people for personal power. In other words, they take advantage of the poor and the vulnerable in the land.

In today's most reading, that's exactly what Israel's doing. The wealthy are actually crushing the weakest members of society. Israel begins to look just like the surrounding nations.

A few wealthy families are oppressing others. When they turn away from the Lord, they no longer treat humans as images of God. They mistreat them and that in turn curses the land. So the holy land becomes accursed. In fact, if we follow the logic of the prophets, at some point God says, "This is enough. This land now is cursed." The temple's destroyed. Judah and Israel, the two kingdoms are taken captive at different points, and the land now is accursed.

God in his mercy and grace can heal the land and people. If he will only turn and remember His people. Psalm 85 could be understood as a Psalm about turning. Turning away from God. Turning toward God. God turning away from His people and land. God returning to His people and land.

The Lord turned the Hebrews slaves into a royal priesthood. In the wilderness the people proved unfaithful and built an idol while Moses was on the mountain, but God showed mercy and turned away his wrath. We see this pattern of the people turning away and returning to God in the wilderness, in the book of Judges, in the story of the Kingdom, and finally in the exile.

When the people turn away, only God can return the people.

The Psalmist cries out for revival, “Turn us, O God of our salvation!” Only by God’s favor can his people return to Him. When God turns toward his people they come alive, their land reveals His glory. The Promised Land becomes the Holy Land.

Even as the people bear witness to God’s grace, their land reveals his glory.

Verse 9 Surely his salvation is near to those who fear him,
that glory may dwell in our land.

Heaven and earth meet in the worship of the people. In verses 10 and 11, we see a call and response between heaven and earth like rain and harvest:

- 10 Steadfast love and faithfulness meet;
righteousness and peace kiss each other.
- 11 Faithfulness springs up from the ground,
and righteousness looks down from the sky.

We can imagine steadfast love coming down even as faithfulness is rising up to meet it. God’s righteousness comes down even as peace or shalom rises from the earth. Verse 11 makes this movement of heaven and earth explicit:

- 11 Faithfulness springs up from the ground,
and righteousness looks down from the sky.

Here is the idea of witness in Psalm 85. The Israelites though sinful and prone to turn away from the Lord, are transformed by His steadfast love. The Lord showers His people with mercy and grace and they are turned, revived, restored, and filled with His light and love. This looks like the revival that happens during Josiah’s reign. Under the guidance of the King, the people offer the greatest Passover celebration ever seen in the history of Israel. And 2 Kings 23:25, records of Josiah, “Before him there was no king like him, who turned to the Lord with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his might, according to all the Law of Moses, nor did any like him arise after him.”

Josiah’s heart was turned to the Lord and he led the people in worship. This is an image of faithfulness springing up from the ground and righteousness looking down from the sky. In this moment, the people shine as witnesses of the Lord as heaven and earth meet in their worship.

This looks like an image of the Temple or the Tabernacle. Heaven and earth are joined in the worship of God’s people. The image of the burnt offering ever rising from the altar is an image of heaven and earth bound together. From this posture, Israel, the Royal Priesthood can pray for the nation and for the world. They can become an instrument of the blessings of Abraham to bless all the families of the world.

As fully God and fully man, Jesus perfectly fulfills the meeting of heaven and earth. Thus Psalm 85 has often been read as an Advent Psalm, looking for the coming Savior of the world who will join heaven and earth in Himself. He will be the burnt offering that connects heaven and earth, even as He is also the High Priest, interceding for His people and the world.

We see this picture in our Ephesians reading this morning:

⁷In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, ⁸which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight ⁹making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ ¹⁰as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth (Ephesians 1:7-10).

He is the offering even as He is uniting all things in himself, things in heaven and things on earth. If we read Psalm 85 through the Ephesians, we see how St. Paul offers us a vision of the church, the called out ones, as a new man made up of Jew and Gentile, called together in Christ, enjoying the favor of God's blessings, lifting a voice of praise to God together, and interceding for the world in Christ who unites heaven and earth in His body. In chapter 1, verse 23, Paul even calls this new family of Jew and Gentile the body of Christ.

In this family, this new man, this people raised up in Christ from all races and lands, we see the unity of heaven and earth, the promise of God made visible.

Like the ancient Israelites, our call is to worship and intercede for the world. Markus Barth goes so far as to say that Ephesians reveals that the people of God have become praise. We are worship. We are witnesses of heaven and earth meeting in Jesus Christ. Even as we rejoice in the food we love and the books we read, we are ultimately witnesses of God's redeeming grace, "To the praise of His glorious grace."

As I think about the uniting of heaven and earth in Psalm 85 and Ephesians 1, I am drawn to one aspect that we may find difficult interpreting in light of our lives today. In Psalm 85, the people and the land are intertwined. Blessing on the people is reflected in blessing on the land. The fruitful land reveals God's pleasure with His people.

As we read this in twentieth-first century America, we may find it difficult to connect the people and the land. First, America is not Israel and this land is not the promised land or the holy land. While our nation has enjoyed God's blessing, we do not have a covenant with the Lord like Israel. That is distinctive to Israel of all nations in history.

Secondly, we do not live off the land in the same way Israel did or many nations have done across the ages. In times of rain and in times of drought, we have known abundance. We are blessed beyond most people who have ever walked the planet. So how do we understand our relationship to the land?

Most of the time, writers simply emphasize the spiritual blessing revealed in the text and fail to discuss the role of land in our lives today. Today I am inviting us into a question to help us start a conversation rather than offering a set of answers. But I think we might take seriously our place in the land.

Over the years, I've encountered some people who take these questions very seriously and try to ask about how our redemption is revealed in the interconnection between us and the land. People like GK Chesterton, Wendell Berry, Eugen Rosenstock Huessy, Philip Sheldrake, AM Allchin, and Maximus the Confessor. These writers came from different times and places, but they all took seriously our role in the land, in the places where we live, eat, walk, rest.

For those who are interested, we might continue to meditate and talk about our role in the places where we live and work, the places where our hearts are bound by family and friends. What does it mean to be a people whose redemption is revealed in the land, in the places where we live? Abraham shows us a model of building altars in the land and digging wells. He worships and he provides refreshment for those around him. He rescues Lot and the tribes taken captive, and he even intercedes for Sodom and Gomorrah. He is blessing the people and land.

Might we be a people whose worship, prayer and service reveal the blessing of God in the places around us in community where we live, the businesses we frequent, in the restaurants where we eat, in the parks where we walk.

When we pray the Lord's prayer, we pray

"Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

We are praying not only for the people but for the earth, the land, the structures, the governments, places of this world.

Poets more than theologians have helped me to see the places around me. So I'll end with a poet. Here Bobi Jones is praising places: his homelands, the fields and waterways where he grew up. He is both angry at the condition of his nation and in love with his nation knowing that the places around that God made and that man made are gifts from the Holy

The Places I Have Loved
by Bobi Jones

Next to people are places. They bind me.
These are often the wall one must fight with one's
Back to. There isn't a one of them didn't have someone there,
Whether God, or man: listen now for the echo of their languages.

There are two kinds, one that God has made on His own
And the one God has made through man. In each, there's a
 well-spring
That flows fluently outside this time,
A well-spring of the inherent 'let there be.' Let our hands be
 laid upon it.
Let us splash them. Let us be able to know the dustless cold.
Let us return to the place we belong, though we despise it.
The stagnant pool unpurified is our own land; and it is this that feeds,
Comforts, or forms words into a sentence.
It cannot be dislodged, only forgotten. Within it,
Yes, there's an intangible well-spring and a place to wash
Whose homely whiteness flows just everywhere.
Come, breeze's breath, that I may praise the places I have loved
 so dearly.
A nook here and there, untidy enough, on a mountain-side it
 wouldn't pay
To nationalize or drown, a town here and there, numerous groves,
One field (or two) where I sat for an afternoon with the rushes,
And stream after stream after stream of inexplicable water.
These have fallen like manna: let's stroll through each one
Kicking our feet and frisking our hands on all sides. These are
 heaven
And they know in the fullness of their so living air
The Hands that planned them to be here on the threshold of
 all being.¹

May this help us meditate on the places where God has put us, has gifted us, has enriched us, and somehow may we begin to reflect on our role and what is our responsibility to these places, to this land, as we are witnesses in all the places that we dwell.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹ Bobi Jones (translated by Joseph P Clancy), *Selected Poems*. Christopher Davies, 1987 (pp. 94-95).