

The Breath of God | *Keeping In Step with the Life-giving Spirit*

Psalm 87; Psalm 48.1- 9; Isaiah 49.20-22; Galatians 4.26

“My Mother, the Church”

5.12.13

Rev. T.J. Campo

Psalm 87 His foundation is in the holy mountains. ² The LORD loves the gates of Zion More than all the other dwelling places of Jacob. ³ Glorious things are spoken of you, O city of God. Selah. ⁴ "I shall mention Rahab and Babylon among those who know Me; Behold, Philistia and Tyre with Ethiopia: 'This one was born there.'" ⁵ But of Zion it shall be said, "This one and that one were born in her"; And the Most High Himself will establish her. ⁶ The LORD shall count when He registers the peoples, "This one was born there." Selah. ⁷ Then those who sing as well as those who play the flutes shall say, "All my springs of joy are in you."

Psalm 48 Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised, In the city of our God, His holy mountain. ² Beautiful in elevation, the joy of the whole earth, Is Mount Zion in the far north, The city of the great King. ³ God, in her palaces, Has made Himself known as a stronghold. ⁴ For, lo, the kings assembled themselves, They passed by together. ⁵ They saw it, then they were amazed; They were terrified, they fled in alarm. ⁶ Panic seized them there, Anguish, as of a woman in childbirth. ⁷ With the east wind You break the ships of Tarshish. ⁸ As we have heard, so have we seen In the city of the LORD of hosts, in the city of our God; God will establish her forever. Selah. ⁹ We have thought on Your lovingkindness, O God, In the midst of Your temple.

Isaiah 49 "The children of whom you were bereaved will yet say in your ears, 'The place is too cramped for me; Make room for me that I may live here.' ²¹ "Then you will say in your heart, 'Who has begotten these for me, Since I have been bereaved of my children And am barren, an exile and a wanderer? And who has reared these? Behold, I was left alone; From where did these come?'" ²² Thus says the Lord GOD, "Behold, I will lift up My hand to the nations And set up My standard to the peoples; And they will bring your sons in their bosom, And your daughters will be carried on their shoulders.

Galatians 4 But the Jerusalem above is free; she is our mother.

We've been looking at the coming of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost... The resurrection has taken place. Jesus Christ has been seen again and again...there can be no doubt that He is indeed risen as He said He would. And the Twelve Apostles have been commanded to do what is so hard for us anxious insecure beings to do and that is ... to wait.

And in order to sort of feel what they were feeling, today, we look back on the BIG STORY the Old Testament has been telling, the meta-narrative or the organizing plotline of history that

these disciples learned as children...but never really grasped until their Rabbi began to clarify it for them. There's an unfolding story in the OT that actually brings everything together and makes sense of history...and these Twelve Apostles and the larger group of 120 disciples/followers were starting to see it ...and were *ABOUT* to see it in a big, BIG way. At the center of this all-encompassing story is God ... and the Mother of His children...AND I know that sounds weird to many of you ...maybe ever blasphemous... but it's there in the Bible and if we can get it and rightly understand it, it helps make sense of our little lives and our little planet and of the big universe. *AND* it compels us to really value something, in fact to treasure something that is becoming a bad word in the Western World and that is organized religion – the Church.

I've mentioned the phenomenal rise in the number of "Nones" (not Catholic women in convents) but people who when asked to identify their spiritual or religious affiliation check the box that says, "None". This is from an October 2012 Pew Research Center report:

"The number of Americans who do not identify with any religion continues to grow at a rapid pace. One-fifth of the U.S. public – and a third of adults under 30 – are religiously unaffiliated today, the highest percentages ever in Pew Research Center polling.

In the last five years alone, the unaffiliated have increased from just over 15% to just under 20% of all U.S. adults. Their ranks now include more than 13 million self-described atheists and agnostics (nearly 6% of the U.S. public), as well as nearly 33 million people who say they have no particular religious affiliation (14%)."

Let's think about it: 1) What's Wrong With Organized Religion and Are There Any Alternatives? 2) What's the Story With God? and 3) What's a Church To Do?

Well, the fact is there are problems with organized religion. We could probably put our heads together and list what people don't like about organized religion... Don't like being told what to believe or what to think... don't like undergoing rituals they don't understand... don't get a lot out of it ("I get more out of looking at a sunrise or jogging") ... all fundamentalism is dysfunctional (and leads eventually to intolerance violence) ... churches want your money... you can help people and do good without organized religion...religious people are way too interested in looking good not being good"

And those are ALL real concerns. And it might surprise you to know (unless you attend St. A regularly!) that Jesus Christ actually had many of the same criticisms for the organized religion He found in His own day. In fact, Jesus issued scathing attacks against the religious people and clergy of His day... one concentrated place to find His criticisms is Matthew chapter 23 – it'll shock you if you've never read it, how apparently "anti-religious" He was!

But when you really break it down...the only alternative to organized spirituality or religion (and for now I'm going to those words interchangeably) is – non-religion, disorganized religion or unorganized religion.

And if you think of yourself as spiritually vital and alive but you just want to come up with your own mix – your own unaffiliated beliefs (a little Yoga...a little of the Christian view of heaven... a pinch of prayer...a little reincarnation) well if we all do that, it has to lead to isolation. You can call it “spirituality” or “religion” or whatever but YOU’RE the only adherent ... and it cannot lead to community...AND it’s not! We’re more fragmented as a society than ever before.

Now the God of the Bible – who IN Jesus Christ was Himself VERY aware of the dangers and excesses of organized religion...is nonetheless in favor of it... (again, the only alternative is chaos, fragmentation and the denial of the true self – the heart or spirit) God is FOR human flourishing and for community and therefore FOR worshipping TOGETHER...AS LONG AS, this communal worship has truth at the center of it.

So God writes/orchestrates a true story...a redemptive history... And in the STORY of God, He chooses a people, the people of Abraham...not because He’s a bigot or because Abraham is genetically superior...but so that *through* the people of Abraham, God would bless the world. The Israelites were chosen to to be a pipeline to all the other nations...

Now the disciples of Jesus...sort of knew that but it was pretty well suppressed in 1stC Judaism. But they were clear on this: God was madly in love with His chosen people. Not because they were a big power-block in fact He shatters that possibility:

“The LORD did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any of the peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but because the LORD loved you and kept the oath which He swore to your forefathers” (Deu 7.7-8)

God chose Abraham’s people because He wanted to show this facet of His character – faithfulness and grace.

And then, as we’ve been seeing...God through the whole OT zeros IN... toward the center...to the Jewish people and their land and the Holy City of Jerusalem. These Psalms celebrate God’s love for His often-unlovely people. The first one (Ps 87) can really be translated, “His establishment is in the Hills of Holiness” i.e. God has set up a base on earth, a headquarters. “The LORD loves the gates of Zion more than all the dwelling places of Jacob...”

And He goes on in these two typical Psalms to develop a theme that runs through out the OT – that God is in LOVE with Israel and with the City where His Temple is – that is His foothold, His base, His center. Where He chose to show His character to Abraham’s people and through them to the world!

“Glorious things of Thee are spoken, O City of God” – I mean, it’s kind of...uh... over-the-top! It’s a song, one of many, a song about a town. Like, “Start...spreadin’ the news...I’m leaving today”... I mean there are songs about towns... But these in the Bible are just a little ...overblown.

I’ll make mention of the other nationalities, “Rahab” (i.e. Egypt) and Babylon (two empires that were the bane of Israel’s existence) and the Philistines (King David’s mortal enemy) and Tyre

and even Ethiopia (representing all the way-out, super far away nations) but Zion (i.e. Jerusalem)...ah Jerusalem! She is the Mother who gave them life!

The Septuagint (the Greek translation of the OT) added a word to v.5...many scholars think that word was in the original and was lost in the copying process, v.5 originally read, "But of MOTHER Zion it will be said..." and many scholars think St. Paul was referencing the Greek version of this Psalm when he told the Galatians, "The Jerusalem above is free and she is our Mother".

And that first Psalm (87) ends with the words, "All my springs of joy are in you – O Jerusalem!" I mean THAT is some town! The City of God, the Church, the Mother of God's children!...But wait! There's more...in fact many more songs in the OT that extol this center of God's activity, this Holy City... The second one we printed, (Ps 48) "God is greatly to be praised in the City of our God...His holy mountain. Beautiful in elevation, the joy of the whole earth..." Wow! That's a big commendation!

It goes on, "kings assembled themselves to sack this city... but when they saw it, saw its order and beauty and wealth and power...they put their tails between their legs and ran away yelping!"

But the thing is... these songs about this town... you know: we can all get a little sentimental ...a little carried away when it comes to our home towns and as we read through the OT...while there were some peak moments... for the most part Israel, Jerusalem, the City of God, the Church, the Mother of God's Children...well...she doesn't seem to live up to these songs. They seem a little *idealized*...unrealistic.

And in fact...as the story God is writing and choreographing actually unfolds... this headquarters, this Church in the OT, this Holy Mother starts looking kind of disheveled ...kind of ... a loose woman... in fact one whole book of the Prophets describes her repeatedly as a prostitute...and many other such references in the prophets.

Until at last, in Isaiah, she sits washed up...like an old used-up and forgotten woman and she feels sorry for herself...actually complains. Her children are gone...she's bereft... and barren. The OT church will go into exile and the Temple be destroyed and the beautiful city will not realize the ideal in the songs...AND yet God will come to His Bride, the Church, the Mother of His children...and once again He promises, "The children of whom you were bereaved will yet say in your ears, 'The place is too cramped for me; Make room for me that I may live here.'

Her children were taken from her...have passed away...and yet...a whisper and she turns around and there they are, "Mom! Make room! We can't all squeeze in!" She had five but now there are seven... and then she keeps turning and sees more and more... they can't even fit in the minivan...in the house...in the beautiful city ...in the whole Land of Israel...they're overflowing...She's bewildered and the Church asks her Husband and he answers, "Thus says the Lord GOD, "Behold, I will lift up My hand to the nations and set up My standard to the peoples;

And they will bring your sons in their bosom, And your daughters will be carried on their shoulders.”

Jesus Christ said, “If I be lifted up I will draw all men unto me” He is the standard God will raise. He will be the Temple destroyed and rebuilt in three days and He will draw all men into the Church – Pentecost will start the movement OUT ...OUT...OUT to gather sons and daughters from all four corners of the earth and they will come streaming into to the new Jerusalem... This is the Ideal begins a new realization when God’s Chosen One will live the way Israel failed to live – He , Jesus Christ, will fulfill Israel’s mission – will be the Perfect Israel – the New Israel. He’ll set up twelve new tribes (Apostles) and tell them go OUT into all the world and make disciples. Say, in the words of Isaiah 43.6,

“say to the north, 'Give them up!' And to the south, 'Do not hold them back.' Bring My sons from afar and My daughters from the ends of the earth”

A new Israel in Christ made up of every tribe and tongue and nation – every city where they gather becomes a holy city, a new Jerusalem!.. But first...wait for the promise: the Holy Spirit and power and that sets us up for Pentecost (next week).

Now, what’s a Church to do in light of this present darkness – the flight from the Church, the Mother of God’s children? Let me pull out some implications and applications: #1) We need to keep this meta-narrative before us because this is where history is headed...Creation – Fall – Redemption – Restoration. And we are now in the phase of restoration in which God is calling His children back to their Mother, the Church. He’s calling them from the four corners of the Earth and they’re coming...maybe not so much in our culture...BUT LET’S NOT GIVE UP. Armed with this understanding of history we must keep insisting on the relevance of the Church – it’s central (Eph 3.21).

#2) In Christ, the Church is the New Israel and so many of the OT texts that speak of God’s love for His Bride are directed at us – it’s not only great news but also helps make sense of what we read - 1Peter ch. 2: “But you are A CHOSEN RACE, A royal PRIESTHOOD, A HOLY NATION, A PEOPLE FOR God’s OWN POSSESSION, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; for you once were NOT A PEOPLE, but now you are THE PEOPLE OF GOD; you had NOT RECEIVED MERCY, but now you have RECEIVED MERCY.”

#3) By way of a challenge – the Bible says, “God is a Father to the fatherless” (Ps. 67.5). My question is: *will the Church be a Mother to the motherless?*

To do this, we need to see what motherhood looks like – we need to see that kind of female parenting that only women can provide... It’s ok to say that males and females are different and each brings something essential to the parenting task.

BTW, (a preface: if you agree, please don’t pat me on the back. If you don’t agree and want to trade insults, I’m not interested. If you disagree and want to actually converse in a civil way, I’d

love to), in the current debate over marriage equality or (if you prefer) definitions of marriage, it is often pointed out that only a few places in the Bible even reference homosexuality. It's a minor theme that you have a hard time even finding in the Bible...so, let's move on to the broader more important themes so prominent in the Bible. And...it's true: homosexuality is a very minor theme hardly ever mentioned.... But, gender *isn't* a minor theme in the Bible – it's a major theme. "God creates woman not as the mirror image of man but as his counterpart, like him and yet unlike him."* God sometimes uses gender-specific language to speak of the Church as Mother and Bride...So, we need BOTH men and women in the church to model masculinity and femininity... And we need the Church to be, among other things, *motherly*. So, moms, teach us...show us... we want to learn from you... and those who were mothered well, we can learn from you too – what does good mothering look like?

And we know, for instance, from these texts, mothers are tender and relational and seek out their children...are life-giving...they sometimes grieve... and want their children to come home...

God is a Father to the fatherless... will the Church be a Mother to the motherless?

*Gilbert Meilaender, "The First of Institutions" from *Pro Ecclesia* Vol. VI, No. 4
(http://www.marshillaudio.org/Downloads/Pdf/Meilaender_Marriage.pdf)