

Peter Wiley
 Psalm 67
 Hudson
 8-17-08

INTRODUCTION: Beginning in September we will introduce Psalm readings to our worship services for a period of time. The Psalms are unique in scripture, in that most of the Bible is seen as God's Word to us. The Psalms are our words to God. They are poems or songs for us to use when we can't find our own words. They are there to help us express ourselves and draw us back to God. This morning's reading is the 67th Psalm, a Psalm of thanksgiving, reminding us – even shaking us back from complacency to giving thanks.

This Psalm or song has an additional feature – the Selah. A marking in the Psalm, that my friend Rabbi Susan Stone reminds me is of unknown meaning. Two times, in the middle of the 67th Psalm there is what is believed by many, according to Susan, to be a direction to the conductor. It's a marginal note believed to be telling the conductor to stop in the midst of the song for cymbals or a massive clap to interrupt the even flow of the song. Sort of a call to wake up and take the words seriously.

SCRIPTURE: *May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face to shine upon us, (Selah) that your way may be known upon the earth, your saving power among all the nations. Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you. Let the nations be glad and sing for joy, for you judge the peoples with equity and guide the nations upon earth. (Selah) Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you. The earth has yielded its increase; God, our God, has blessed us. May God continue to bless us; let all the ends of the earth revere him.*

SERMON: One of those apocryphal stories says that Mildred, the church gossip and self appointed monitor of the church's morals kept sticking her nose into other people's business. Many of the people in that church didn't approve of Mildred's meddling, but feared her enough to keep silent. But Mildred made a mistake when she told people that George, a new member of the church, was an alcoholic after she saw his old pick-up truck parked in front of the town's only bar one afternoon. She emphatically told George and anyone else who would listen that seeing his truck parked in front of a place was plenty of evidence of what he was doing.

Well, George, a man of few words, stared at her for a moment and then just turned and walked away. He didn't explain, defend or deny. He said nothing. Later that night, George quietly parked his pickup in front of Mildred's house . . . walked home . . . and left it there all night.

Gossip. Picking away at other people's lives. Critiquing, needling, fault finding, complaining and plain old ornery behavior is one way to live. To that, the Psalmist emphatically says "no." With a crash of ancient cymbals, the Psalmist says, be in awe of the gifts of life.

We can look for the worst in everything . . . or we can seek out the best. The Psalmist says give thanks for the goodness of life, build up, and offer praise.

A few weeks ago we were up north in Michigan, in Sleeping Bear Dunes national Park just west of Traverse City on Lake Michigan. Friends told us to take the little hike up a trail to a place called Pyramid Point. The trail leads through the woods and up a slow incline. Finally, it lets out at a bluff – a sand dune that drops off almost 400 feet to the lake below. When we emerged from the trees, there was a man with his young son just ahead of us. The man looked out at the view. Looked down at his son and said:

God sure didn't mess-up when he did this . . .

Only he said it in far more colorful language than that. And I thought, that's no way to speak in front of a little kid. But then I looked out at the Caribbean Blue waters below and Manitou Island off in the distance – honestly one of the most beautiful sights I've ever seen . . . and I thought, "you know what, he's right, God did create an amazingly awe inspiring world. And sometimes we need to acknowledge it. Some times we need to give thanks for its wonder.

Have you ever been so overwhelmed with beauty that it hurts? Maybe driving out Interstate 90 through Montana left in absolute awe at the size of the sky. Or seeing a sunset hidden behind glimmering clouds so beautiful that it brought you to the verge of tears. Or just a single flower in a garden, so intricate, so perfect that you're left breathless. Like seeing the birth of a child, left in such amazement at the miracle that there is absolutely no doubt in that moment that there is a God and that, that God is so very good.

In those awe inspiring moments it's easy to say thanks. It's easy to know we're blessed. It's easy to see that life's truly a gift. But those moments don't come too often for most of us.

More often in my experience, life blurs by and we miss much of its wonder. We get caught up in wishing for more, for something different, something better – and we miss what we have. We miss the wonder right in front of us.

The Litchfield Hills where I used to live just an hour out of New York City are stunningly beautiful. But after living in a place like that for a long time, we tend to forget and miss it altogether, absolutely unaware of creation's wonder. I remember years ago being jealous of a good friend who lived out west because he lived at the foot of the Rockies. It wasn't until I spent a few months out west and then drove

back home that I realized how blind I'd been. There was incredible beauty right in front of me, but I hadn't seen it.

It saddens me to think of how much of life blurs by. Days, weeks, even years wasted worrying, being upset, angry and hurt. To that, the Psalmist sounds a loud clap, a gong in the midst of our days saying, "No." Saying, give thanks, be glad and sing for joy. Sometimes we need someone to shake us and remind us of the wonder of life and just how good it is.

Where do you fit? Are we critics, constantly finding fault and nit picking everyone and everything? Or are we builders? Finding the good in each other and offering praise?

Are we worriers, forever fearful of life's what ifs and next trauma?
Or do we live in gratitude for the good of the moment?

Are we constant complainers, always thinking we've been shorted, cheated and mistreated & jealous of others who always seem to have it better than we do?

Or do we live in awe of just how blessed we really are?

Do you remember the old hymn, "Count Your Blessings"? It says:

*When upon life's billows you are tempest tossed,
When you are discouraged, thinking all is lost,
Count your many blessings, name them one by one,
And it will surprise you what the Lord hath done.*

*Count your blessings, name them one by one,
Count your blessings, see what God hath done!
Count your blessings, name them one by one,
And it will surprise you what the Lord hath done.*

What a bunch of drivel. I mean it. Life isn't always so good. What about the suffering?

What about when you really are cheated and mistreated? What about when life is stopped in its tracks?

A sudden life threatening illness.
A job's lost.
A loved one breaks a sacred trust.

Sometimes life can seem utterly unfair. Sometimes in huge ways and other times so subtle and real only to you. I used to think the idea of counting your blessings was silly in the face of life's disparity. But I don't believe that any more. Life IS blessing.

This day and every day is the day the Lord has made . . . even the ones that don't seem so good . . . and we should be glad in them all.

One year ago this week, Rabbi Susan Stone's husband died without warning, leaving her behind with their two teenage sons. I remember talking to Susan in the weeks and months after he died. She told me she was in a cloud – in a fog. She said the pain was so deep. But she then went on to say she was even more deeply thankful. She and her boys were and are blessed and she knew it and knows it. Last week she told me she still gives thanks every day . . . and that helps keep her whole

This isn't some sort of Pollyannaish thinking where everything works out for the best. No, there are parts of life that are nothing but hard, that are simply painful.

In the Talmud there's a great quote about a sage who has fallen ill. The sage is asked, "Are your sufferings welcome to you?" And the sage answers, *No, not them, nor their rewards*. The sufferings aren't good – even if a blessing comes out of them. No, the sage says there is good *despite* the suffering. And that's what we need to remember if we ever wish to be whole.

We just need to be reminded of the gift of it all. We need the Psalmist's clanging cymbals to call us back to thanks.