

“God’s People at Work”

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A Reflection for Labour Day Weekend

Psalm 122

August 31, 2014

I was glad when they said to me:

“Let us go to the house of God.”

And now our feet are standing within your gates, O Jerusalem.

Jerusalem is built as a city bound firmly together.

There the tribes go up, the tribes of God,

to give thanks to the name of God, as was decreed for Israel.

There the thrones of justice stand, the thrones of David's house.

Pray for the peace of Jerusalem.

“May those who love you prosper!

May there be peace within your walls, prosperity within your palaces!”

For the sake of my kin and friends I say: “Peace be with you!”

For the sake of the house of our God, I will seek your good.

Psalm 122 (Voices United #845)

I rejoice, as we worship together here, in this house of the Lord God.

Not just because we haven’t worshipped here this month. Not only because it is my first Sunday here after a few months doing other things.

I rejoice because we are doing some vitally important work together, right now.

Many use this long weekend as a final break of the summer, a break from work. This weekend, however, is also about work. With Labour Day, we celebrate all who work. We can think about the work we do, every day (whether we are paid for it or not). God gives us the gift of work—good, productive labour. God gives work for the flourishing of God’s creation, and us within it.

And we’re working right now, worshipping. Worship a work of God’s people.¹ I rejoice because together we are doing such good, productive work, worshipping God.

Yes, I said “productive.” Worshipping, we won’t produce anything that can be sold, nor craft anything that can be consumed. We can’t put a price on worship. We can’t mark it on a

¹ One of our worship-words, liturgy, literally means “work of the people.”

time sheet. Still, worshipping God is productive. Vivally so.

II

This summer, I built a wooden play set in our backyard. It's for the children Barb babysits. I finished it. Kids have played on it. It hasn't fallen down. It looks good. Good job!

The most productive part of building it was not when I put it together.

The play set came in boxes. All the wood was pre-cut, the holes pre-drilled. It had all the hardware in bags: bolts and nuts, brackets and seats, swings and slide. It was ready for assembly by someone with my meagre skills.

Yet, as I said, assembling it was not the most productive part of the process.

No, it was, first, reading the instructions. Second, opening the bags of hardware and laying out the pieces. Then, sorting them for each step in the assembling I was about to do. That all took a couple of hours—lots of pieces, and lots of steps. Assembling it took another twelve hours. Yet it was the two hours, not the twelve, that mattered most. It was the two hours, not the twelve that were most productive. It looked like I had done very little after those two hours of reading and sorting—a few creased pages and many piles. Yet those hours meant more to the successful project, than the twelve hours that followed.

III

This one hour together in worship will shape our 167 hours that will come this week. No matter what we will do, nor what will happen to us, the good stuff and the tough stuff, it is what we do this hour that makes the difference for the rest.

Psalm 122, the one we read, is about worship. People are coming up to the “house of the Lord,” the Temple in Jerusalem, to praise and pray to God. The Temple at its centre makes the whole city holy. Jerusalem is a place of praise and prayer.

God uses this psalm to teach us some things about praise and prayer in our place here.

IV

Worshipping God HOLDS us together.

The Psalm says all the tribes go up to Jerusalem, the twelve tribes of Israel. People from the mighty tribe of Judah and folks from tiny little Benjamin. From Naphtali in the north and Simeon down south. From Dan along the coast and Reuben over the mountains. All sorts,

coming to Jerusalem to worship God.

The Psalm calls Jerusalem a city “bound firmly together.”² One early translator put it like this: the Holy City is “at unity with itself.”³ All that diversity—the twelve-tribes diversity—in this place of worship finds a unity with itself. All fit together. All complement each other, worshipping God.

Our worship holds us together. Different sorts of people. Different experiences. Even divided by disagreements, worshipping God holds us together.

Worship holds each of us together, in our own selves. A minister paid a visit to a woman. He found her embroidering a piece of cloth, held tight on an oval hoop. She said, “Pastor, while waiting for you to come I realized what’s wrong with me—I don’t have a frame. My feelings, my thoughts, my activities—everything is loose and sloppy. There is no border to my life. I never know where I am. I need a frame for my life like this one I have for my embroidery.”⁴

Worshipping God places us in a frame, and holds us together.

It’s the frame that says, *“God looked at all God had made, and it was very good.”*⁵

It says, *“God made them, male and female”—that’s all of us!—in God’s image.*⁶

The frame, *“I am the Lord God who brought out of slavery: you will have no other gods before me.”*⁷

*“God loved the world so much that God gave his only son. So anyone who trusts in him will not perish, but have life eternal.”*⁸

“Love the Lord your God with everything you are. Love your neighbour as if they were

² Voices United #845.

³ From the Coverdale Bible. Published in 1535, it was the first complete English translation of the Bible. Quoted in Eugene H. Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction. Second Edition* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 2000), 52.

⁴ Peterson tells this story on p. 53.

⁵ Genesis 1.31.

⁶ Genesis 1.27.

⁷ Exodus 20.2-3.

⁸ John 3.16.

you.”⁹

*“While we were weak, sinners, God’s enemies, Jesus died for us.”*¹⁰

*“This is my body. This is my blood. Broken for you. Shed for you.”*¹¹

*“The tomb is empty. He is risen!”*¹²

*“Baptize in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.”*¹³

*“In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself . . . and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.”*¹⁴

*“I see a new heavens and a new earth.”*¹⁵

*“Behold! I am making all things new!”*¹⁶

Worshipping, we behold the presence of God who is always with us. And in worship, we see that all things—all of us, all about us, the whole creation—live within the embrace of God’s healing, reconciling, rescuing, forgiving, life-giving, flourishing love.

Without that frame, everything unravels.

Living in that frame, all the threads and stitches, hold together.

V

Worshipping God, this work we are doing now, holds us together for all the work, and everything else in the days to come.

Worshipping God SENDS us into those days, to pray.

Of course, we pray now. That’s part of worship. But the praying doesn’t stop after now.

⁹ Deuteronomy 6.4-5 and Leviticus 19.18b; see also Matthew 22.39 and parallels.

¹⁰ See Romans 5.6-10.

¹¹ See Mark 14.22-24 and parallels.

¹² See Matthew 28.6 and parallels.

¹³ Matthew 28.19.

¹⁴ 2nd Corinthians 5.19.

¹⁵ Revelation 21.1.

¹⁶ Revelation 21.5.

Now just gets us going.

The Psalm says “*Pray for the peace of Jerusalem.*” The Hebrew word for “pray” here is *shawal*. It means “ask.” It’s not a particularly churchy word. It’s not a high-liturgy worship word. It’s not so much about the praying we do in here. It’s the praying we will do in the days to come, out there.¹⁷

“Pray for the peace of Jerusalem . . . May there be peace within your walls, prosperity within your palaces!”

A bit of world-play is going on here: pray (*shawal*) for peace (*shalom*) and prosperity (*shalwa*).

Shalom, peace, is about wholeness, completeness, rest and no hostility. When all is well, that is peace. Daily pray for peace.

Shalwa, prosperity, is not about having tons of cash. It’s about having enough to flourish, enough to rest easy.¹⁸ Daily pray for this prosperity.

Pray these—peace and prosperity—for Jerusalem. For the community around us. For the neighbourhoods we belong to. For the world we’re part of.

VI

Worshipping God is the work that gets us ready for everything else.

We work through the instructions and sort things out, so then we can go build.

God holds us in the frame. God keeps us together, ravel us who have unravelled. God holds us in who we truly are.

God sends us as pray-ers. People to pray for wholesome peace, and restful prosperity. Workers for the flourishing of all things.

I am glad to worship! Amen.

¹⁷ Peterson, 56.

¹⁸ Ibid, 57.