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December 16th: Psalm 115 & Revelation 8

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The folly of idolatry. The seventh seal and first four trumpets.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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Transcript

Psalm 115 Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to your name give glory, for the sake of your steadfast love and your faithfulness. Why should the nations say, Where is their God? Our God is in the heavens, he does all that he pleases. Their idols are silver and gold, the work of human hands.

They have mouths, but do not speak, eyes, but do not see, they have ears, but do not hear, noses but do not smell, they have hands but do not feel, feet but do not walk, and they do not make a sound in their throat. Those who make them become like them, so do all who trust in them. O Israel, trust in the Lord, He is their help and their shield.

O house of Aaron, trust in the Lord, He is their help and their shield. You who fear the Lord, trust in the Lord, He is their help and their shield. The Lord has remembered us, He will bless us, He will bless the house of Israel, He will bless the house of Aaron, He will bless those who fear the Lord, both the small and the great.

May the Lord give you increase, you and your children, may you be blessed by the Lord, who made heaven and earth. The heavens are the Lord's heavens, but the earth He has given to the children of man. The dead do not praise the Lord, nor do any who go down into silence, but we will bless the Lord, from this time forth and for evermore.

Praise the Lord. Psalm 115 contrasts those who trust in and are blessed by the Lord with those who trust in idols and are cursed as a result. The Lord is utterly unlike the idols of the nations.

This psalm may have been designed for a liturgy, given its changes in style and its repetitions and what seem to be antiphonal responses. This is one of the Halal Psalms. From Psalm 113 to Psalm 118 there is a cycle of psalms that would have been sung at festivals such as the Passover.

This particular psalm would have been the first of the four that was sung after the final cup in the Passover for instance. It begins by calling upon the Lord to glorify His name in the sight of the nations, by demonstrating His character. The people call God to act on account of His steadfast love and His faithfulness, not on account of anything that they have done.

They want the Lord to vindicate His reputation. The nations are asking where is their God? God is not acting on behalf of His people. His people are being put to shame.

Even when God's people have gone astray, God is still concerned for the glory of His name and He will hallow His name by restoring His people. Considering the claims of the idolatrous nations round about that God is not acting, the psalmist declares that God is in heaven. He is unlimited in His sovereignty.

Heaven is here spoken of as a realm of unconstrained might and authority. This is one of the great polemics against idolatry. We find something similar in the book of Isaiah in places like Isaiah 44 verses 9-17.

The ironsmith takes a cutting tool and works it over the coals. He fashions it with hammers and works it with his strong arm. He becomes hungry and his strength fails.

He drinks no water and is faint. The carpenter stretches a line. He marks it out with a pencil.

He shapes it with planes and marks it with a compass. He shapes it into the figure of a man, with the beauty of a man, to dwell in a house. He cuts down cedars or he chooses a cypress tree or an oak and lets it grow strong among the trees of the forest.

He plants a cedar and the rain nourishes it. Then it becomes fuel for a man. He takes a part of it and warms himself.

He kindles a fire and bakes bread. Also he makes a god and worships it. He makes it an idol and falls down before it.

Half of it he burns in the fire. Over the half he eats meat, he roasts it and is satisfied. Also he warms himself and says, Aha, I am warm, I have seen the fire.

And the rest of it he makes into a god, his idol, and falls down to it and worships it. He prays to it and says, Deliver me, for you are my god. The idols then are impotent.

Their apparent faculties are powerless. They have eyes but they can't see. They have ears but they can't hear.

Looking to such a creation of man's hands for deliverance is futile. They can't save. They have to be carried around from place to place.

The psalmist contrasts God's doing and God's making with the doing and making of idolaters. Idolaters end up becoming like their idols. They close down and ultimately become dead.

We become like that which we worship. In worshipping dead, lifeless idols, people close down, their hearts become hard, their necks become stiff. In contrast, those who worship the living God are renewed in their life.

The points that the psalmist makes here are similar to those found in Psalm 135 verses 15-18. The idols of the nations are silver and gold, the work of human hands. They have mouths but do not speak.

They have eyes but do not see. They have ears but do not hear. Nor is there any breath in their mouths.

Those who make them become like them. So do all who trust in them. There is a threefold exhortation following this to trust the Lord that is given to Israel, the house of Aaron and to those who fear the Lord.

These are likely antiphonal statements assuring the people of the value of trusting in the Lord. The priest perhaps leads the people in this statement of trust and then the people, or perhaps the Levitical choir, responds with He is their help and their shield. The three different groups refer to Israel as a whole nation, to the priestly house of Aaron and to all who fear God wherever they might be.

The Lord is the source of help. He comes to his people's aid. He is the shield.

He is the one who protects his people from attack. Following this threefold exhortation to trust, there is a threefold encouragement that the Lord will bless his people. He has remembered his people.

He has seen their distress. He will act on their behalf. He will bless the house of Israel.

He will bless the house of Aaron. He will bless those who fear the Lord. The psalmist declares a blessing, an increase for them and their children, by the Lord who made heaven and earth.

In contrast to the idols, this is one who can truly provide blessing. Once again the psalmist reminds the hearer that the Lord acts from the heavens. The heavens are the Lord's heavens.

The realm of authority and power and might, the realm that holds everything else under its sway, belongs to the Lord. He is free within that realm. It is his realm.

The earth, by contrast, has been given to the children of man. If the Lord is above, the dead are those who go down. The dead do not praise the Lord.

They pass down into silence. This cessation that occurs as people pass into silence is contrasted with the forevermore worship of the people of God. They will bless the Lord vocally from that time forth and forevermore.

They are not of the dead that pass down into death. They are not of those who worship dead idols who will become like dead idols. They are those who worship God in heaven, the living God, and as a result they look forward to eternal life.

A question to consider, what are some of the ways in scripture that God, in contrast to the idols, leads his people into fullness of life? Now the seven angels who had the seven trumpets prepared to blow them, the first angel blew his trumpet, and there followed hail and fire mixed with blood, and these were thrown upon the earth. And a third of the earth was burned up, and a third of the trees were burned up, and all green grass was burned up. The second angel blew his trumpet, and something like a great mountain, burning with fire, was thrown into the sea, and a third of the sea became blood.

A third of the living creatures in the sea died, and a third of the ships were destroyed. The third angel blew his trumpet, and a great star fell from heaven, blazing like a torch, and it fell on a third of the rivers and on the springs of water. The name of the star is Wormwood.

A third of the waters became wormwood, and many people died from the water because it had been made bitter. The fourth angel blew his trumpet, and a third of the sun was struck, and a third of the moon, and a third of the stars, so that a third of their light might be darkened, and a third of the day might be kept from shining, and likewise a third of the night. Then I looked, and I heard an eagle crying with a loud voice as it flew directly overhead.

Woe, woe, woe to those who dwell on the earth, at the blasts of the other trumpets that

the three angels are about to blow. The Lamb opened the first six seals of the book in Chapter 6. The opening of the final seal of the book was delayed in Chapter 7 until the 144,000 of Israel could be sealed. Like the preparation for the coming of the destroying angels in the striking down of the firstborn in Egypt, with the blood placed on the lintel and the doorposts, or the marking out of the foreheads of those who mourned for Jerusalem in Ezekiel Chapter 9, this protects a righteous remnant from the judgment that is coming.

There are a number of occasions where an awaited judgment tarries while a remnant is being prepared. Elijah is told to prepare devastating judgment for Israel in anointing Haziel as king of Syria, Jehu as king of Israel, and Elisha as his successor. However, after he appoints Elisha, we have to wait for many chapters until any judgment falls.

In the interim, the Lord blesses and forms a faithful remnant through Elisha, bringing healing and deliverance. Now, with the 144,000 sealed, the seventh seal can finally be opened. As Peter Lighthouse emphasises, the events of the seals should not be considered to be the actual contents of the book.

The contents of the book, commonsensically, cannot actually be read until all of the seals have first been opened. Likewise, the trumpets that follow the seals should be seen more as heralding the book and its contents than being its actual contents. Throughout Revelation to this point of chapter 8, we have observed the repeated significance given to the number 7. It is a number associated with the creation week, and there is a sort of creation and de-creation occurring here.

The opening of the seventh seal looks rather different from the opening of the seals that preceded it. The immediate result of it is silence, lasting for about half an hour. The Old Testament, as Greg Beale notes, contains several instances of silence prior to the judgment of the Lord.

There might be a sort of divine judgment scene being set up here. The loud worship of the last few chapters is stilled, an expectant hush comes over everyone as the long-awaited judgment is about to begin. We can see something of this in Zechariah 2.13, Be silent all flesh before the Lord, for he has roused himself from his holy dwelling.

or Zephaniah 1.7, Be silent before the Lord God, for the day of the Lord is near, the Lord has prepared a sacrifice and consecrated his guests. Habakkuk 2.20 introduces another judgment scene with similar words, But the Lord is in his holy temple, let all the earth keep silence before him. The arrival of the Lord to judge, described in the following chapter of Habakkuk, in chapter 3 verses 3-6, is similar to some of the descriptions of the open seals in Revelation.

God came from Teman, and the Holy One from Mount Paran. His splendor covered the heavens, and the earth was full of his praise. His brightness was like the light, rays

flashed from his hand, and there he veiled his power.

Before him went pestilence, and plague followed at his heels. He stood and measured the earth, he looked and shook the nations. Then the eternal mountains were scattered, the everlasting hills sank low.

His were the everlasting ways. The silence here might also be associated with Sabbath themes. Here in Revelation 8, the great judgment of God comes from the Lord enthroned in his temple.

The throne is there, as is the altar of incense. These are elements of the temple scene. Why is the silence for half an hour? It's not entirely clear to me.

However, it could be because we are waiting for the full hour to pass and the completion of the substance of the seventh seal. But the first half of that time belonging to the seventh seal belongs to the expectant silence. The full hour of judgment has not yet been reached.

Perhaps the trumpets inaugurate the awaited hour of judgment but don't fully bring it. The seven angels that stand before God, to whom John now turns, are described as the angels. They may be specific archangels.

Others have suggested that they are the angels of the seven churches. Considering that the angels of the seven churches are likely human beings and earthly messengers of the churches, this identification seems unlikely to me. However, some association almost certainly exists.

What these seven angels are in heaven, the seven angels of the churches are on earth, much as the earthly lampstands of the churches correspond to the seven lamps of the spirit before God's throne. The seven angels are now given seven trumpets and they will initiate the process of judgment. We might think here of the destroying angels of the Passover.

Reading of seven trumpets, we might also recall the story of the destruction of the city of Jericho in Joshua chapter 6, where there are seven priests with seven trumpets who circle the city of Jericho on seven successive days. Before any trumpet is blown, however, another messenger comes and stands at the altar with a golden censer, where he is given incense to offer with the prayers of the saints on the golden altar before the throne. Here we ought to think back to the opening of the fifth seal in chapter 6 verses 9-11.

Then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been. This messenger or angel, who might be the spirit himself, by whom the prayers of the saints are lifted up to God's throne, takes the prayers of the

saints beneath the bronze altar of the courtyard relating to the earth, and brings them up into the heavenly temple, into God's very throne presence, and to the golden incense altar before the throne. Fire from the golden altar of incense and God's presence is then taken and cast down to earth.

The scene that follows should remind us of Sinai in Exodus chapter 19 verse 16. On the morning of the third day there were thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud on the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast, so that all the people in the camp trembled. And again in Exodus chapter 20 verse 18.

Now when all the people saw the thunder and the flashes of lightning and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking, the people were afraid and trembled, and they stood far off. Christ himself speaks of the judgment that he intended to bring in terms that should make us think of this in Luke chapter 12 verses 49-53. I came to cast fire on the earth, a wood that it were already kindled.

I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how great is my distress until it is accomplished! Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division. For from now on in one house there will be five divided, three against two, and two against three. They will be divided, father against son, and son against father, mother against daughter, and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law, and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.

Now the seven trumpets begin to be blown. There is a four and three pattern here, as the trumpets are interrupted by the announcement of the eagle. The seals also had a four and three pattern, or perhaps a four-two-one pattern, as the first four seals were announced by the living creatures.

The trumpets largely seem to involve things falling down from the heavens. The trumpets might also have some associations with the days of creation, especially on day four when the sun, moon and stars are judged. There is simultaneously a de-creation and a new creation occurring here.

There are also similarities with some of the plagues upon Egypt, as we will see. Furthermore, as Lighthouse notes, there are parallels between the trumpets and the events of chapters twelve to fifteen that follow. Blood, fire and hail correspond to the hailstorm in chapter eleven verse nineteen.

The mountain cast into the sea corresponds with the dragon thrown down in chapter twelve verses seven to thirteen. The star that comes down and makes the rivers and the springs bitter corresponds with the dragon spewing water like a river in chapter twelve verses fifteen to sixteen. The judgment of the stars, sun and moon on the fourth day corresponds with the beast from the sea in chapter thirteen verses one to eight.

The fifth trumpet, with the scorpions and locusts, corresponds with the beast from the land in chapter thirteen verses eleven to eighteen. The army from the Euphrates and the witnesses in the sixth of the trumpets corresponds with the harvest of the one hundred and forty four thousand in chapter fourteen verses seventeen to twenty. And then finally, in both cases, the kingdom becomes Christ's in the seventh trumpet and then also in chapter fifteen verses one to four.

The trumpets ramp up the events that are associated with the seals that proceeded, moving from a quarter to one third of things being affected. They intensify what the seals began but also move the story further. Three things are cast to earth after the first trumpet, hail, fire and blood.

This trumpet should recall the seventh plague upon Egypt in which fire was present in the midst of the hail in Exodus chapter nine verses twenty-two to twenty-five. The blood that is cast down is a clue. It is the blood of the martyrs.

It comes back upon the heads of their murderers. The repeated emphasis upon the third part recalls Ezekiel chapter five verses one to two. And you, O son of man, take a sharp sword, use it as a barber's razor and pass it over your head and your beard, then take balances for weighing and divide the hair.

A third part you shall burn in the fire in the midst of the city when the days of the siege are completed. And a third part you shall take and strike with the sword all around the city. And a third part you shall scatter to the wind and I will unsheathe the sword after them.

The symbolic action of the prophet is explained in verse twelve of that chapter. A third part of you shall die of pestilence and be consumed with famine in your midst. A third part shall fall by the sword all around you.

And a third part I will scatter to all the winds and will unsheathe the sword after them. Lighthouse suggests that we should understand the trees and the green grass as different groups of people within the earth in the land of Israel. The striking of the grasses is a destruction also of food, leading to famine.

It afflicts both the grass, the more general population perhaps, and the trees, the righteous or maybe the rulers. But the grass is affected much more. Perhaps like the initial plagues, this is seen to afflict everyone, even the righteous within the land, those who believe in Christ.

This recalls the famine in the land in Acts chapter eleven verse eight, a crisis for which relief has to be sent to the Judean Christians. The second trumpet casts a great burning mountain into the sea. It turns a third of the sea into blood.

We have a similar statement in Matthew chapter twenty-one verse twenty-one. And

Jesus answered them, Truly I say to you, if you have faith and do not doubt, you will not only do what has been done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, Be taken up and thrown into the sea, it will happen. In Matthew chapter twenty-one, Jesus might be referring to the temple mount that is just opposite.

The turning of water into blood also recalls the first of the plagues on Egypt. One of the purposes of that plague was to bring unavoidably to the surface the blood that had been shed in the river, and the great wrong that had been committed there. What is the great mountain burning with fire? Various suggestions have been put forward.

Could it be Sinai, a mountain that flamed with God's presence? It could be the temple mountain that burns with sacrifice. Or maybe it's the burning land that follows the first trumpet. It could be the church, as that which burns with the presence of God and is the new mountain, as it were, within the land.

It is most likely that the meaning here ultimately points to the polluting blood of the martyrs that spills out into the wider sea of the Gentiles. The realm of the diaspora surrounding the land. This is the realm of ships and of living creatures.

The ships are diaspora Jews who live upon the ocean of the Gentiles but are related to the land. The living creatures within the sea are the God-fearers, the Gentile adherents of Jewish faith. In the book of Acts we see this taking place.

The church goes out from Jerusalem, and in all these different parts of the world we see the judgment of God following in their wake. As in city after city, Jewish communities are shaken up by the gospel. While many Jews accept, far more Jews reject the message of the missionaries.

And the blood of the martyrs that first polluted the mountain of Jerusalem starts to spread out into the wider world. The third angel blows his trumpet, and a star falls from heaven, rendering the land waters bitter. This is reminiscent of Isaiah chapter 14 verses 12 to 19.

How you are fallen from heaven, O day star, sun of dawn! How you are cut down to the ground, you who laid the nations low! You said in your heart, I will ascend to heaven, above the stars of God I will set my throne on high. I will sit on the mount of assembly in the far reaches of the north. I will ascend above the heights of the clouds.

I will make myself like the Most High. But you are brought down to Sheol, to the far reaches of the pit. Those who see you will stare at you and ponder over you.

Is this the man who made the earth tremble, who shook kingdoms, who made the world like a desert and overthrew its cities, who did not let his prisoners go home? All the kings of the nations lie in glory, each in his own tomb. But you are cast out, away from your grave, like a loathed branch, clothed with the slain, those pierced by the sword, who go

down to the stones of the pit, like a dead body trampled underfoot. Many have seen this figure as Satan himself, but it is the ruler of Babylon.

Nevertheless, there are clear parallels with the casting down of the dragon, of Satan from the heavens, in chapter 12 verse 9 of Revelation, after which a deadly river proceeds from his mouth. Whoever this falling star is, behind him lurks the devil himself. This falling star turns the springs and the rivers deadly, the fresh, life-giving waters of the land, symbolically associated with the temple, from which living waters were supposed to flow.

This is the inverse of Mara. Their bitter waters were made sweet by casting something into them, and now sweet waters are made bitter. Behind this text we might also see an allusion to Deuteronomy chapter 29 verse 18 following.

There Moses gives a warning about a root bearing poisonous and bitter fruit, such a person who leads others into idolatry, produces a situation where the land is afflicted and sick. It seems likely that this star Wormwood is a poisonous source of idolatry or false worship here. Following the falling down of a ruler, angelic or human, the very temple in its worship had been made bitter and unhealthy by Satan.

The fourth trumpet judges the sun, moon and stars. This is connected with the fourth day of creation, and there would seem to be quite close parallel here. The sun, moon and stars also represent powers and authorities, Isaiah chapter 13 verse 10.

For the stars of the heavens and their constellations will not give their light, the sun will be dark at its rising, and the moon will not shed its light. Jesus teaches the same in the Olivet Discourse in Matthew chapter 24 verse 29. Immediately after the tribulation of those days, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken.

Priests, kings and other rulers, the stars, the sun and the moon will be judged, much as Herod is struck down by the Lord in Acts chapter 12. Many of the lights are going out over Israel, darkening the land and giving it over to the forces of disorder. The whole world, the whole firmament around Israel is gradually being torn down through these trumpets.

The chapter ends with the eagle's proclamation of coming woes in the remaining three trumpet blasts. The eagle is the fourth of the living creatures, and perhaps this associates the three previous trumpets with the lion, the ox and the man respectively. A question to consider.

Where might we find background to the eagle's proclamations of woes in the Gospels?