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December 13th: Psalm 107:1-22 & Revelation 5

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Examples of deliverance among a restored people. Who is worthy to open the seals?

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

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Transcript

Psalm 107 verses 1-22 O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever. Let the redeemed of the Lord say so, whom he has redeemed from trouble, and gathered in from the lands, from the east and from the west, from the north and from the south. Some wandered in desert wastes, finding no way to a city to dwell in.

Hungry and thirsty, their soul fainted within them. Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress. He led them by a straight way, till they reached a city to dwell in.

Let them thank the Lord for his steadfast love, for his wondrous works to the children of man. For he satisfies the longing soul, and the hungry soul he fills with good things. Some sat in darkness and in the shadow of death, prisoners in affliction and in irons, for they had rebelled against the words of God, and spurned the counsel of the Most High.

So he bowed their hearts down with hard labour, they fell down with none to help. Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress. He brought them out of darkness and the shadow of death, and burst their bonds apart.

Let them thank the Lord for his steadfast love, for his wondrous works to the children of man. For he shatters the doors of bronze, and cuts in two the bars of iron. Some were fools through their sinful ways, and because of their iniquities suffered affliction.

They loathed any kind of food, and they drew near to the gates of death. Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress. He sent out his word and healed them, and delivered them from their destruction.

Let them thank the Lord for his steadfast love, for his wondrous works to the children of man. And let them offer sacrifices of thanksgiving, and tell of his deeds in songs of joy. Psalm 107 is the first psalm of Book 5 of the Psalter.

However, as several commentators observe, in this case the division seems rather artificial, as the psalm takes up several elements of the two immediately preceding psalms at the end of Book 4, Psalm 105 and 106. Perhaps the most immediate thing we might observe here is the similarity of the opening of both psalms. Psalm 106, verse 1 opens with the same expression as Psalm 107.

Praise the Lord, O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever. We might also, as Nancy de Classe-Wulford suggests, regard the beginning of Psalm 107 as Book 5's answer to the concluding words of Book 4, in verses 47-48 of Psalm 106. Verse 48 was quite likely the concluding doxology of the book, and not part of the psalm itself.

Save us, O Lord our God, and gather us from among the nations, that we may give thanks to your holy name, and glory in your praise. Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting. And let all the people say, Amen.

Praise the Lord. The opening words of Psalm 107 and of Book 5 concern the gathering of the people from the nations to worship the Lord. Psalm 107 has a series of four descriptions of divine deliverance, following a set pattern, leading to a reflection on the Lord's ability to provide for his people in each and every potential form of their distress.

The four vignettes of the psalm are of wanderers in the desert, verses 4-9, released captives, in verses 10-16, healed sick persons or perhaps delivered fools, in verses 17-22, and sailors delivered at sea, in verses 23-32. The pattern of each of these sections is similar. There is an account of the distress, a prayer or call to the Lord, an account of the deliverance, and an expression of thanksgiving with which the vignette concludes.

There are repeated phrases in the vignettes that suggest the possibility of a response of liturgical performance taking place, perhaps with the priest singing the main body of

each section, with the worshipping congregation singing the responses. We have the repeated phrases, Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress. Then, Let them thank the Lord for his steadfast love, for his wondrous works to the children of man.

However, as is usually the case in scripture, repetition is as much about variation as it is about similarity. By largely repeating but varying a pattern, the variations stand out to the attentive reader in ways that they would not otherwise. John Goldengave reflects upon this feature of As usual, the four parallel earlier sections manifest differences rather than being completely identical.

For instance, the first begins with a katal verb, the second and fourth with participles, the third with a noun. The first and third begin with a regular sentence, the second and fourth with an extra-opposed clause. The first and second give reasons backing up the challenge to give testimony, the third and fourth expand on the way to give testimony, and the four sections are of varying length according to how detailed is the description of the trouble and the deliverance.

The fact that the last main section, verses 33-41, abandons the format of the first four while dealing with a similar form of experience, further illustrates this liking for variety within a framework of similarity. Conrad Schaefer notes the fact that a number of the descriptions of distress from which the Lord delivers are evocative of the events of the Exodus. The psalm begins with a call to give thanks to the Lord.

It is addressed to a company of people that have been restored from the East and the West and the North and the South. Alan Ross is among the commentators who argues that we should read overseas instead of south God has gathered in all of these peoples from various lands, lands in which they were presumably scattered as a result of their sin. This gathering together is for the purpose, among other things, of worship.

They are supposed to assemble together and declare the Lord's praise. These redeemed exiles are expressing an experience of collective redemption. Their being brought together is a manifestation of God's goodness and restoration.

But within their collective restoration there are many different forms of deliverance that they have each experienced. And in the vignettes that follow there are four of these different cases explored. The first begins with wandering in desert wastes.

We might think about the experience of Israel in the wilderness here, but also the experience of wandering in exile, being cut off from the goodness of the land. Hungering and thirsting can refer to the very literal hungering and thirsting in the wilderness, but also to the hungering and thirsting for the Lord, the sort of hungering for the Lord's presence and deliverance that is described in various parts of the Psalms as the deer pants for the waters, for instance. God leads these people by a straight way to a city that

they can dwell in.

He satisfies the longing soul. He fills the hungry soul with good things. The second vignette is of captives, people who are imprisoned in darkness and the shadow of death, the deepest darkness of all.

They are in this state of distress on account of their sin. They've rebelled against the word of God and as a result they are suffering hard labor. We might again think about the story of the Exodus.

This is the experience of Israel in the opening chapter of the book of Exodus, crying out to the Lord in their trouble and he delivering them from their distress. Here he brings them out and he bursts their bonds apart. He shatters the doors that enclose them and enables them to walk free.

The third vignette refers either to folly or to sickness, more likely folly. Once again people suffering as a result of their sin. Their folly has led them into sin and they are suffering the consequences.

As in the previous two examples they are going down towards death and once again they cry to the Lord in their trouble and he delivers them from their distress. The way that that refrain pierces every bit of darkness within these different vignettes is important. It encourages the worshipper to do the same in their particular difficulties and trials.

And having been delivered to give thanks to the Lord and to testify to his goodness and his deliverance to the end that others might do the same. This particular vignette ends with people offering sacrifices of thanksgiving and declaring the deeds of God in songs of joy. One important feature of the Psalms is the way that they serve as a response to the works that God has done.

These are a way of metabolizing God's great deeds, a response in joy, a response in meditating upon what God has done and upon the sinfulness of Israel's rebellion at various periods of their history. It's a way of deepening Israel's formation by God's acts in their history and strengthening the processes of memory that are so emphasized in books such as Deuteronomy. A question to consider.

One of the interesting features of this particular psalm is the way in which it offers these vignettes that are evocative of the Exodus without directly referring to the Exodus. In these vignettes we see something of the original deliverance of Israel, yet framed in a way that invites the worshipper to find themselves in that experience. It is a way of bridging the gap between the worshippers own experience and the experience of the people of God historically.

By means of such bridges people can become part of the story that they are reading. It is

a way of figuring yourself and your experience into what you are reading. What are some of the means by which we figure ourselves into the story that God has given us in scripture? Revelation chapter 5 Revelation chapter 5 Revelation chapter 5 Revelation chapter 5 Revelation chapter 5 In chapter 4 John was brought up to witness the worship of the heavenly temple.

Now in chapter 5 the great events that will shake the entire world, events that will play out over the chapters that follow, start to be set in motion. The chapter begins with a scroll and with a problem. There is a scroll on the right, not necessarily in the right hand, of the one on the throne.

It is sealed with seven seals. Although a mighty angel asks who is worthy to open it, no suitable candidate is found. The right hand is associated with authority and rule and deliverance.

The lack of anyone to open the scroll implies the lack of anyone suitable to be at the father's right hand. Peter Lighthouse argues that we get some sense of the significance of the book by considering the hymns that follow. Receiving the book is connected with receiving power and wealth and wisdom and might and honour and glory and blessing.

It is written on the front and on the back. This might suggest that it is some sort of covenant document. In Exodus chapter 32 verses 15-16 this is the way that the tablets of the covenant are described.

Then Moses turned and went down from the mountain with the two tablets of the testimony in his hand, tablets that were written on both sides, on the front and on the back they were written. The tablets were the work of God and the writing was the writing of God, engraved on the tablets. Perhaps we should see the sealed document as the fulfilment of this covenant.

A similar description of a book is given to us in Ezekiel chapter 2 verse 10. And he spread it before me, and it had writing on the front and on the back, and there were written on it words of lamentation and mourning and woe. Elsewhere in Daniel chapter 7 we see another heavenly throne room scene with books that are opened.

As in Daniel chapter 7 this passage describes the advent of a figure to the heavenly throne room, a figure who will receive immense authority. As we look at these two passages alongside each other we will see a great many parallels. This passage we should assume is set before the ascension.

Christ as the slain lamb is ascending into the heavenly throne room to take his place at the Father's right hand. The coming of the Lion of the tribe of Judah is the coming of one to sit down at the right hand of the Father. It's the Davidic son of God coming to take his place.

The sealed book is most likely the book referred to in Daniel chapter 12 verse 4. But you Daniel, shut up the words and seal the book until the time of the end. Many shall run to and fro and knowledge shall increase. And chapter 12 verse 9 he said go your way Daniel, for the words are shut up and sealed until the time of the end.

Now with the ascension of the Son of Man, with the ascension of the Lamb, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the time for the opening of the book and the initiation of the last days has come to pass. The book being open then suggests that the time has come for the fulfilment of events foretold by the prophet Daniel. And unsurprisingly in the next few chapters we will see several strong allusions to the prophecy of Daniel, not least in the coming of the Son of Man on the clouds to the Ancient of Days.

The angel seeks a worthy figure to open the scroll. Later the living creatures, the 24 elders and the entire angelic company will praise the Lamb in hymns declaring His worthiness. We should recall that the previous chapter ended with a statement of God's worthiness in verse 11.

Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honour and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created. The figure suitable to open the scroll must demonstrate a worthiness that corresponds to God's own worthiness. There is a search for candidates in verse 3, in heaven, earth and under the earth, and there is none to be found.

That the sea is not searched suggests that this is not a role that someone who is a Gentile could perform. It requires a Jew. John's response on the lack of anyone suitable to open the scroll is to weep.

He is a human participant in the scene in this action. He expresses the lamentation, the desire and the longing for God's kingdom to come and the deep yearning that there would be someone suitable to set it in motion. Without such a figure God's promised future would seem to be stillborn.

And so his lament is on account of a deep problem, the lack of a figure who is worthy to usher in the age to come. But yet he is instructed not to weep. Someone suitable has been found, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David.

The connection of the Lion with Judah goes back to Genesis chapter 49 verses 9-10 and the blessing of Jacob upon the tribes. Judah is a lion's cub, from the prey, my son, you have gone up. He stooped down, he crouched as a lion, and as a lioness.

Who dares rouse him? The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until tribute comes to him, and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples. Lion imagery suggests might and power and dominion. It associates Jesus with the patriarch Judah and presents the lamb as the full flowering and expression of the

tribe of Judah's strength, their coming into full sovereignty.

The title the Root of David comes from Isaiah chapter 11 verse 1. There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his root shall bear fruit. And verse 10. In that day the root of Jesse, who shall stand as a signal for the peoples, of him shall the nations inquire, and his resting place shall be glorious.

Root of David language connects Jesus with David but as one who exceeds him. The root of David's sovereignty and rule might be the foundation of the reign and authority of David himself. We can here recall Jesus' questioning of the Pharisees in Matthew chapter 22 verses 41-45.

Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them a question saying, What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he? They said to him, The son of David. He said to them, How is it then that David in the spirit calls him Lord, saying, The Lord said to my Lord, Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet. If then David calls him Lord, how is he his son? We have just been told of the lion of the tribe of Judah who has been conquered then, but immediately after being introduced to this figure we don't see a lion but a lamb and what is more a sacrificial lamb who has been slain.

This victory does not take the form that we might expect. The jarring juxtaposition of lion and lamb imagery should startle the reader. The victory of this figure is through suffering, his conquest is through death.

Commentators debate it but in verse 6 the lamb might be presented as standing in the midst of the throne. He has seven horns, symbols of power and seven eyes, here identified as the spirit of God. We have already seen seven torches of fire identified as the seven spirits of God in chapter 4 verse 5. This might suggest that the lamb takes up the place of the throne and the seven spirits of God come to be associated with him and with his reign.

This might be related to the vision of Zechariah chapter 3 and 4. We see in chapter 3 verse 9, For behold on the stone that I have set before Joshua, on a single stone with seven eyes, I will engrave its inscription, declares the Lord of hosts, and I will remove the iniquity of this land in a single day. The eyes now roam throughout the earth, which might be a progression as Gregory Beale notes. The spirit, the seven eyes have been given to the sun, and the spirit now works throughout all of the world, the eyes going out into the whole earth.

We should consider the similarities between the lamb and the beast that appear later in the book. The lamb has multiple eyes and horns and is also like a lion. We should note that the beast in Daniel chapter 7 verse 8 in the related scene has seven horns after three of his initial ten horns are plucked out.

Another one of the beasts is like a lion. The lamb approaching the one seated on the throne in verse 7 corresponds with the scene of Daniel chapter 7 verses 13 and 14. I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the ancient of days, and was presented before him.

And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed. The horns and the eyes might represent different aspects of kingdoms.

As he takes the scroll the four living creatures and 24 elders start to worship the lamb. They make music and offer incense like the priests in the temple. The incense is connected with the prayers of the saints, presumably prayers that God's kingdom would come.

The worship here is similar to that found at the end of chapter 4. That was on account of creation. This is on account of redemption. The worship here connects the worthiness of the lamb with the fact that he was slain.

His death was the means of conquest. By his death he ransomed people for God, from every tribe and language and people and nation. And you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth.

This is taking up the language of Daniel chapter 7 verse 22 and 27. Judgment was given for the saints of the Most High, and the time came when the saints possessed the kingdom. And the kingdom and the dominion and the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven shall be given to the people of the saints of the Most High.

His kingdom shall be an everlasting kingdom, and all dominion shall serve and obey him. We also see language like tribe and language and people and nation in verse 14 of chapter 7 of Daniel. Further Old Testament background is found in Exodus chapter 19 verses 5 and 6. Now therefore if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine, and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

The language of verses 9 to 10 is clearly alluding to that, but it has changed. No longer is this a special people that is set apart from all other peoples, taken out of all the other peoples to be a treasured possession. Now this kingly and priestly people has been taken from all tribes and tongues and peoples and nations.

This is no longer just Israel, it is an international people that Christ is forming by his work. We start with the praise of the four living creatures and the 24 elders. And in verse 11 it expands so much more.

The voices of the living creatures and the elders are joined by the voice of many angels,

myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands. John is here taking up the language of Daniel chapter 7 verse 10. A stream of fire issued and came out from before him, a thousand thousands served him, and ten thousand times ten thousands stood before him.

The court sat in judgment, and the books were opened. Here the worthiness of the Lamb is to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honour and glory and blessing. This language might allude to 1 Chronicles chapter 29 verses 11 and 12.

Yours O Lord is the greatness and the power and the glory and the victory and the majesty, for all that is in the heavens and in the earth is yours. Yours is the kingdom O Lord, and you are exalted as head above all. Both riches and honour come from you, and you rule over all.

In your hand are power and might, and in your hand it is to make great and to give strength to all. The worship of the Lamb here shows just how high a Christology John has. The Lamb here is receiving worship on a par to God himself, in a book that clearly speaks elsewhere about not offering worship to anyone but God alone.

The chapter ends with the worship extending even further. Every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea now as well are all joining in this song of worship and the worship now is addressed to the one on the throne and the Lamb together. They are the joint object of the whole creation's praise.

A question to consider. How might this chapter instruct us in reforming our own worship?