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November 21st: Psalms 56 & 57 & Acts 19:8-20

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Two confident prayers for deliverance. Magic and miracle in Ephesus.

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

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Transcript

Psalm 56, to the choir master, according to the dove on far off Terabintz, a miktam of David, when the Philistines seized him in Gath. Be gracious to me, O God, for man tramples on me, all day long an attacker oppresses me. My enemies trample on me all day long, for many attack me proudly.

When I am afraid, I put my trust in you, in God whose word I praise. In God I trust, I shall not be afraid. What can flesh do to me? All day long they injure my cause, all their thoughts are against me for evil.

They stir up strife, they lurk, they watch my steps as they have waited for my life. For their crime will they escape? In wrath cast down the peoples, O God. You have kept count of my tossings, put my tears in your bottle.

Are they not in your book? Then my enemies will turn back. In the day when I call, this I

know, that God is for me, in God whose word I praise. In the Lord whose word I praise.

In God I trust, I shall not be afraid. What can man do to me? I must perform my vows to you, O God. I will render thank offerings to you, for you have delivered my soul from death, yes, my feet from falling, that I may walk before God in the light of life.

Psalm 56 is a psalm of trust from a psalmist encompassed by great danger. The superscription of the psalm sets it in the context of the events of 1 Samuel 21 verses 10-13. And David rose and fled that day from Saul and went to Achish the king of Gath.

And the servants of Achish said to him, Is not this David the king of the land? Did they not sing to one another of hymn and dances, Saul has struck down his thousands and David his ten thousands? And David took these words to heart and was much afraid of Achish the king of Gath. So he changed his behaviour before them and pretended to be insane in their hands and made marks on the doors of the gate and let his spittle run down his beard. Like other such superscriptions, the effect is to present David not merely as the author of the psalm but as paradigmatic in his struggles.

David is effectively exiled from the land and surrounded by his enemies and the worshipper is invited to compare his own situation with that of David, conforming himself to the anointed one, much as the Christian should look to Christ and model himself after him. The psalmist calls out to God for help in his great trouble but the predominant note of the psalm is one of trust and confidence. The psalm opens with a familiar petition to God to be gracious, a request made from a position of immediate danger.

The psalmist is surrounded by enemies who are in the ascendancy and persistent in their assaults upon him. Verses 3-4 present a movement of the psalmist's soul, beginning with fear and ending with the resolution of that state in not being afraid. The movement is a there and back again or chiasmic structure, moving from fear to trust to praise then back to trust and then to not being afraid.

The psalmist's response to fear is to trust, which leads him to God, whom he praises. With the confidence in God aroused by praise, he is moved to a firmer trust and his fears are dispelled. The more that he reflects upon God, the more the superiority of the one that he trusts in over his enemies becomes plain.

They are but frail flesh and what can flesh in its mortality and weakness ultimately do to him when he is supported by the eternal God? From this declaration of confidence in the Lord, the psalmist returns to describing his enemies and their actions against him. His enemies are relentless, their assaults are continuous all day long. They are preoccupied with doing him harm, they lie in wait for him at every opportunity.

The enemies described here might be different from those described in verses 1 and 2. At this juncture he turns from description of his enemies to petition to God. He asks the

rhetorical question, for their crime will they escape? The answer must surely be no. He calls upon God to cast his enemies down.

David is confident that God is neither unaware nor unmindful of his distress. Every tear he has shed, every restless night, is intimately known by God. God has gathered the psalmist's tears in a bottle and recorded all of his wanderings or his tossings and turnings.

All of his sorrow and struggle has, as it were, been written down by God himself. The psalmist can approach God as one who is not unfeeling to his servant, but as the one who diligently preserves testimonies of the suffering of his faithful ones, so that they might always be brought to mind. When he calls to the Lord in the midst of deep peril, his enemies will be defeated, as God is for him and will act in his cause.

In a reaffirmation of the theme of the psalm, David returns to a slightly modified reprise of his statement of verse 4. In God, whose word I praise, in the Lord whose word I praise, in God I trust, I shall not be afraid. What can man do to me? God's word is his promise. It's the rope to which David doggedly clings in the depths of his troubles.

The words of David here might remind the Christian of the words of Paul in Romans 8.31. If God is for us, who can be against us? Confident in God's deliverance, David vows to render thanks offerings to him, like one aspiring a cloud heavy with rain on the horizon in a land of deep drought. Anticipation of deliverance is itself a foretaste of the awaited relief. Psalm 57 To the Choir Master, according to Do not destroy, a miktam of David, when he fled from Saul in the cave.

Be merciful to me, O God, be merciful to me, for in you my soul takes refuge. In the shadow of your wings I will take refuge, till the storms of destruction pass by. I cry out to God Most High, to God who fulfills his purpose for me.

He will send from heaven and save me. He will put to shame him who tramples on me. God will send out his steadfast love and his faithfulness.

My soul is in the midst of lions. I lie down amid fiery beasts, the children of man whose teeth are spears and arrows, whose tongues are sharp swords. Be exalted, O God, above the heavens.

Let your glory be over all the earth. They set a net for my steps. My soul was bowed down.

They dug a pit in my way, but they have fallen into it themselves. My heart is steadfast, O God. My heart is steadfast.

I will sing and make melody. Awake my glory, awake, O harp and lyre. I will awake the dawn.

I will give thanks to you, O Lord, among the peoples. I will sing praises to you among the nations, for your steadfast love is great to the heavens, your faithfulness to the clouds. Be exalted, O God, above the heavens.

Let your glory be over all the earth. Psalm 57 is another petition for help, although throughout the dominant theme is that of confidence in God's power and His readiness to deliver. The superscription of the psalm connects it with David's fleeing from Saul in the cave.

This might either refer to David's escape to the cave of Bedalim at the beginning of chapter 22 of 1 Samuel, or perhaps to his encounter with Saul in the cave in 1 Samuel chapter 24. Its concluding five verses are also found in Psalm 108 verses 1 to 5. Psalm 36 verse 5 reads as follows. Your steadfast love, O Lord, extends to the heavens, your faithfulness to the clouds.

And that is almost identical to verse 10 of this psalm. For your steadfast love is great to the heavens, your faithfulness to the clouds. Beth Tanner observes the fact that we find repeated sections and phrases of psalms at many points in the Psalter.

Indeed, we even find slightly reworked psalms as in the case of Psalm 53. Such repeated and remixed elements are certainly not unprecedented in modern Christian music and hymnody, but, if anything, are rather more commonplace in the Psalter. In addition to the fact that its superscription sets it as a similar period in David's life as the preceding psalm, it also shares the opening words of that psalm.

Be merciful or gracious to me, O God. David begins the psalm by seeking refuge from God. He might have sought refuge in the cave, but the true source of his refuge is the Lord himself, and it is to him that he looks for shelter, as if from a storm.

There is danger without, and under the shadow of God's wings he will be safe until it passes by. He declares his confidence in God to others in verses 2 and 3. He calls out to the Most High God. God will avenge him, send from heaven to deliver him, and put to shame all who trample him.

God's sending from heaven, although action from an unassailable throne, is not action from a distance of indifference. God sends out his very steadfast love and his faithfulness to the psalmist's aid. David's soul is in the midst of lions, enemies with deadly teeth, whose tongues also work destruction.

He is in considerable danger. Verse 5 interrupts this thought, with a refrain to which he will return in the final verse. Be exalted, O God, above the heavens.

Let your glory be over all the earth. He calls for the glory of God to be made manifest, for God to act decisively in his situation, in a manner that reveals his surpassing greatness. In verse 6 he returns to the actions that his enemies took against him, but now described

as a danger from which the Lord has delivered him.

His enemies fell into the pit that they themselves had dug. The psalm began with the petition, Be merciful to me, O God, be merciful to me. Now this is answered with the triumphant words, My heart is steadfast, O God, my heart is steadfast.

From such a deliverance, song appropriately bursts forth. David must sing and make music to express his joy. He rouses his glory, his bursting soul.

He rouses musical instruments, the harp and the lyre. He is so filled with praise that he would rouse the dawn itself, the very part of creation that rouses all other creatures of the day. If David began by hiding in a cave, now he wants to find the most exposed place in all of the world, so that his praises and thanks can be heard by all.

In verse 3, God sent down his steadfast love and faithfulness from the heavens. Now in verse 10, they rise up to the heavens. The final verse of the psalm returns to the refrain of verse 5, Be exalted, O God, above the heavens.

Let your glory be over all the earth. However, while the refrain functioned as a petition in verse 5, in verse 11 it functions more as a proclamation of the greatness of God and of his deeds. A question to consider.

This psalm, like many others, plays upon the contrast between the depths and the heights, between the cave and the pit, and God in the heavens. Looking through the psalm, can you observe some of the ways that David is using this imagery, both for poetic effect and illumination of the truth? Acts chapter 19, verses 8 to 20. And he entered the synagogue and for three months spoke boldly, reasoning and persuading them about the kingdom of God.

But when some became stubborn and continued in unbelief, speaking evil of the way before the congregation, he withdrew from them and took the disciples with him, reasoning daily in the hall of Tyrannus. This continued for two years, so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks. And God was doing extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul, so that even handkerchiefs or aprons that had touched his skin were carried away to the sick, and their diseases left them and the evil spirits came out of them.

Then some of the itinerant Jewish exorcists undertook to invoke the name of the Lord Jesus over those who had evil spirits, saying, I adjure you by the Jesus whom Paul proclaims. Seven sons of a Jewish high priest named Sceva were doing this. But the evil spirit answered them, Jesus I know, and Paul I recognize, but who are you? And the man in whom was the evil spirit leaped on them, mastered all of them, and overpowered them, so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded.

And this became known to all the residents of Ephesus, both Jews and Greeks. And fear

fell upon them all, and the name of the Lord Jesus was extolled. Also many of those who were now believers came, confessing and divulging their practices.

And a number of those who had practiced magic arts brought their books together and burned them in the sight of all. And they counted the value of them, and found it came to fifty thousand pieces of silver. So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily.

In the middle of Acts chapter 12 we find the apostle Paul in Ephesus, in one of the longest periods of his ministry in any single city. He spends three months teaching in the synagogue. The fact that he can remain there for so long suggests that they are more receptive than they were in other parts of the empire.

Perhaps in a large cosmopolitan city like Ephesus they are more open to new ideas. However there is a progressive hardening of the opposition to Paul. Some become stubborn, they continue in unbelief, and then they speak evil of the way before the congregation.

Paul at this point responds by withdrawing from them, and he starts teaching in the hall of Tyrannus. As he withdraws from the synagogue, he takes the disciples with him. It seems that a number of people have converted through Paul's message, and now they follow him out of the synagogue and into this new context of teaching.

Whereas in previous cities when he had left the synagogue no mention had been made of him taking a community with him and starting up a new site of teaching, here a new community of learning seems to have been formed immediately. The hall of Tyrannus was likely a sort of lecture theatre. Tyrannus might have been the lecturer for the main hours of the day, and then after those hours were over, Paul could use the hall to teach and debate with other teachers in the city, perhaps spending special time at the end of the day instructing the new disciples.

Some versions of the text give the hours of his teaching as from the 5th to the 10th hour at the end of verse 9. That would be from about 11am to 4pm. Paul would likely be working for his keep in the early morning, during which time Tyrannus was using the hall, and then he would teach for the rest of the day. People would be able to come in during the siesta time in the afternoon and listen to him speak.

In such a way Paul would have become one of the known philosophers or teachers within the context of the city of Ephesus. And the result seems to have been a spread of the word of the gospel from this urban centre throughout the whole region of Asia. We might presume that this context would also have been more familiar to Greeks, to persons who did not come from a Jewish background, and as a result people might have been more receptive outside of the Jewish community.

Alongside the founding of this new school, Paul also is performing great miracles. Even handkerchiefs or aprons that had touched his skin were used to heal the sick. These handkerchiefs or aprons may perhaps have been sweat rags that he used during his work as a tentmaker.

One can imagine people surreptitiously obtaining these and then using them for the sick. This might also recall the story of the woman with the issue of blood, who touched the garment of Christ and was healed from her condition. The nature of these miracles seems somewhat magical.

This is not the typical form in which exorcisms and healings occur. Daryl Bok raises the possibility that God is dealing with people in a way that they would understand. In a city preoccupied with magic, the healings have a character that is somewhat similar to magic.

However, as already noted, we should recall that there are events like this in the Gospels, and also a few events like it in the Old Testament, such as in the stories of Elijah and Elisha. The summary of the healings and exorcisms that we find here might recall similar summaries of the miracles of Jesus in places like Luke 4, verses 40-41. Now when the sun was setting, all those who had any who were sick with various diseases brought them to him, and he laid his hands on every one of them and healed them.

And demons also came out of many, crying, You are the Son of God! But he rebuked them, and would not allow them to speak, because they knew that he was the Christ. The difference between magic and miracle becomes clearer in the case of the seven sons of Sceva. He is a chief priest, not a high priest.

A high priest wouldn't be so far from Jerusalem. The healings and exorcisms performed by Paul don't occur through skills or arts, through incantations or formulas, but through the action of God through him. The name of Christ is not used as something by which to manipulate or control God, but has something that is a sign of authorization.

Appealing to Jesus' name by itself does not convey power. The sons of Sceva presume that Jesus' name is a source of power that enables them to manipulate him to act, rather than something that can only be used by faithful persons to whom that power is entrusted. Faith is entirely absent in their more incantational approach.

And the story here indicates the degree of syncretism that existed between Ephesus' culture of magic and Jewish practice. The demons know Jesus and they recognize Paul. Some have suggested a distinction being drawn here between knowing and recognizing.

Whether or not there is, we see examples of this both in the Gospel and earlier on in the story of Acts. Luke chapter 4 verses 33-34 And in the synagogue there was a man who had the spirit of an unclean demon, and he cried out with a loud voice, Ha! What have

you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God. In Acts chapter 16 verses 16-17 As we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a slave girl who had a spirit of divination, and brought her owners much gain by fortune-telling.

She followed Paul and us, crying out, These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation. This is a reminder that Paul is fighting against the kingdom of Satan itself, and all these minions are part of that struggle. The demon enables the man to overpower all of the seven sons of Sceva, badly wounding them and stripping them naked, humiliating them.

In this process there is also a humiliation of their false form of religion. They are shamed, but the name of Jesus is extolled. His name is not just a name that people can use to manipulate things, but it is a name that has been given to faithful persons to proclaim, and to act in terms of as a means of deliverance to oppressed persons.

Fear falls upon people, much as after the judgment upon Ananias and Sapphira. This event provokes many new believers to confess their dabbling in magical practices, openly divulging practices whose power supposedly lay in their remaining secret, bringing them into the light and destroying them. The syncretism of the Jewish sons of Sceva suggests that Ephesus was fertile ground for syncretistic practices, so such a radical disavowal of magic is noteworthy and necessary.

The demonic realm is real and powerful, and to thoroughly abandon its powers and turn to Christ alone would be a very powerful public demonstration of the confidence that believers had in the fact that Jesus was Lord over all principalities and powers, that there were no spiritual forces above him. The burning of the books was a public rejection of the way of life that they represented, an abandonment of the false power that they offered, and a surrendering to Christ. This wasn't a forced confiscation of magical books from others, and the immense value of the material burned is probably an indication of the number of people involved, as well as the huge part that magic played in people's lives.

The fact that they would invest so much money in it suggests that this was a major preoccupation for them, born of a desire for power and also extreme fear of these spiritual forces. Christ has set them free from all of that. The cost of all of the books has been estimated by some as equivalent to 50,000 days wages for an average worker.

This would be a catastrophic blow to the Kingdom of Satan within the realm of Asia. One of the dangers for the early church was always that of displacing the old paganism, yet still being conceived of as a form of religion that functioned in the same way as that old paganism. Alexander Schmemmann discusses the way that the sense of religion of a period can distort Christian faith and practice according to its image.

He writes, This means that piety can accept the cult in a key other than that in which it was conceived and expressed as text, ceremony or rite. Liturgical piety has the strange power of transposing texts or ceremonies, of attaching a meaning to them which is not their plain or original meaning. He gives the example of something that he calls Mysteriological Piety.

This was essentially the old patterns of religion that existed before the Gospel was accepted, into which Christian notions were then slotted. As such it was only half of a conversion. The powers of the old paganism had been swapped out for those of Christ, but the fundamental notion of what religion is, of what it means to relate to God, had not been sufficiently transformed.

As a result there was a general desire for Christianity to perform the purposes of the old paganism, so church buildings started to be seen as sacred and sanctifying places, and certain holy sites started to attract cults to them. The external rites and ceremonies of worship started to become more and more elaborate and complicated. This established a sort of external solemnity which sacralised certain ceremonies and actions, emphasising that they were not regular things, in order to develop an atmosphere of sacred and religious fear.

Along with this was a sharper distinction between clergy and lay people, the clergy performing these sacralising rites. All of this was a distortion of Christianity, which in some of these quarters was trying to do what paganism had done, albeit in a Christian key. Framing Christianity in terms of magic was a huge danger in Ephesus.

In these verses we see how God communicated his power in a way that grabbed the attention of such a culture, while decisively distinguishing the Christian faith from it. A question to consider, what are some of the cultural notions and models of religion that are prevalent in our own day that we might be tempted to reframe the Christian faith in terms of?