

Psalm 144:1-15
No right to be here.

Ruskin Falls, August 25, 2019
Pulaski Heights Presbyterian Church
11th Sunday after Pentecost

TEXT (NRSV)

Blessed be the LORD, my rock, who trains my hands for war, and my fingers for battle; my rock and my fortress, my stronghold and my deliverer, my shield, in whom I take refuge, who subdues the peoples under me. O LORD, what are human beings that you regard them, or mortals that you think of them? They are like a breath; their days are like a passing shadow. Bow your heavens, O LORD, and come down; touch the mountains so that they smoke. Make the lightning flash and scatter them; send out your arrows and rout them. Stretch out your hand from on high; set me free and rescue me from the mighty waters, from the hand of aliens, whose mouths speak lies, and whose right hands are false. I will sing a new song to you, O God; upon a ten-stringed harp I will play to you, the one who gives victory to kings, who rescues his servant David. Rescue me from the cruel sword, and deliver me from the hand of aliens, whose mouths speak lies, and whose right hands are false. May our sons in their youth be like plants full grown, our daughters like corner pillars, cut for the building of a palace. May our barns be filled, with produce of every kind; may our sheep increase by thousands, by tens of thousands in our fields, and may our cattle be heavy with young. May there be no breach in the walls, no exile, and no cry of distress in our streets. Happy are the people to whom such blessings fall; happy are the people whose God is the LORD.

(1)

This passage is a prayer-song – a *psalm* – to God, offered by a king in the lineage of Israel’s King David. Like David in his own time and like other kings in most all times, this king, at times, has resorted to war to maintain his power and protect his people against what the psalm calls “aliens,” persons who have confronted the king and his rule as an enemy threat. The king trusts that what he’s done in war, he’s done in keeping with God’s will.

(2)

In a remarkable little book entitled *The Warriors: Reflections on Men in Battle*, World War II veteran J. Glenn Gray, writes the following (Harper Torchbooks, 1970, p. 24):

It is exceedingly unlikely that I shall ever be able to understand the why and wherefore of war. . . . The deepest fear of my war years, one still with me, is that these happenings had no real purpose. . . . This conclusion I am unwilling to accept without a struggle; indeed, I cannot accept it at all except as a counsel of despair. How often I wrote in my war journals that unless that day had some positive significance for my future life, it could not possibly be worth the pain it cost.

Put another way: A world that glorifies war for war’s sake, is a senseless world. If being a warrior is not aimed at ending the need for war, then being a warrior is madness.

The psalmist we are listening to today would agree. He has waged war, but not for war’s sake. He believes he’s done so in the cause of a better, God-intended future. He believes that, as horrible as war is, he has waged it as the lesser of two evils.

Now, once again, the king has found himself surrounded by enemies. This time, however, the enemy's "sword" is made not of metal but of *words*. Right now, the king is surrounded by powerful enemies who threaten his undoing by deviously spreading lies regarding him and his policies. Even persons whose right hand once was raised in an oath of loyalty or as a promise to serve the king, have raised their hand *dishonestly*. They now are *opposing* what they had promised to help him accomplish. And, they have put the king in a perilous position. He's having a hard time defending himself against this onslaught of falsehoods. Sensing himself powerless to stop the toll these raging waters of deceit are taking, he cries out to God for help: As God has delivered him in battles past, he prays, so may God free him now from this onslaught of lies. Do this, he prays, and he will go on striving for the kind of community he knows God desires on earth: He'll strive for conditions in which young people can truly thrive and flourish. He'll strive for a community where no one lives poor or goes hungry. He'll strive for a society free of violence, injustice, and injury to the human spirit. He'll strive for life enjoyed and shared by all in keeping with the goodness of God's creative aim.

This king's prayer is an expression of gratitude to God for the help that God has been for him in times past; it is a plea to God to be a mighty fortress for the king in the present crisis; and it is acknowledgment of the kind of society that God surely intends a ruler to strive for.

(3)

There are two lines in this passage that I have skipped over thus far. They read: "O LORD, what are human beings that you regard them, or mortals that you think of them? They are like a breath; their days are like a passing shadow." These are the lines I want now to focus on. And I want to begin by considering their context in this psalm.

We have noted the psalmist's acknowledgment that things sometimes happen to and around us that are more than we can handle on our own – that things sometimes happen to and around us that leave us feeling we need God's help or else we're doomed.

We've also noted the psalmist's acknowledgment that turning to God for help should mean turning to God for help that is in keeping with God's will. I shouldn't pray to God for help with something that runs counter to the greater good that God intends. Prayer for God's help should mean prayer for help in bringing about things that do God's goodness justice. The psalmist's prayer is not a selfish prayer; it's not an I-Me-Mine prayer, cut off from the good that God intends for others; it's not a "Give-me! Give-me! Give-me!" prayer, asking to receive something simply for the king's own sake. Rather, it is the prayer of God's grateful servant. While it is a prayer for help for himself, it is, at the same time, a prayer for help through which the king, in turn, shall be better positioned to make God's goodness known and God's blessings available to others.

The psalmist, you see, understands that he is utterly dependent on God for the meaning of his life and what becomes of him; he understands that what finally matters is not what he himself has or what others think of him, but, rather, the good that God is up to in and through his life; he understands that God's concern for his good is inseparable from God's concern for the good of others. Therefore, whatever else the king prays for, he gratefully prays for help in doing God's goodness justice on this earth; whatever else he prays for, he gratefully prays for God's help in striving for a world in which people know, enjoy, and share life's blessings in keeping with God's good will and way.

And, amidst that confidence in God's goodness, will, and way, the psalmist prays: "O Lord, what are we human beings, that you should regard our good with such concern? What are we, that our good is so important to you? We are like a breath: we are present for a moment, and in a moment we are gone. Our time in this world is as fleeting as a passing shadow. We were born, we live a while, and then we die. What is it about us, O God, that we should so matter to you, and that you should regard our good so deeply, so compassionately, and forever?"

That said, that prayed, the psalmist quickly moves on to focus on his present distress, the help he needs from God, and acknowledgment that what he asks for himself, he asks for with an eye to the good of all. The two lines regarding human mortality and worth sound rather like a brief aside in the actual prayer. It's as if, while praying for God's help, the psalmist suddenly and unexpectedly was gripped by intimations of mortality that he let come briefly to word before moving on to what he mainly wanted to pray about.

What I want to suggest, however, is that, what comes to word in these brief lines regarding our mortality and worth, is something that belongs to every prayer to God. What comes to word here is recognition of something whose truth we humans are anxiously reticent to be open about, yet which we must be open about, if we are to be honest to God. What is recognized in these lines is this: *We are not entitled to life in this world; we have no right to be here.*

I realize that that is a dangerous thing to say. Time and again throughout history, some people's denunciation of other people as having no right to be here has had tragic, indeed deadly, consequences. Throughout history, some people have looked at something about other people – at some act they've committed; or at something about their biological make-up; or at something about their psychological make-up; or at something about their ethnicity, their nationality, their religion, their culture; or at something perceived as mental deficiency, physical disability, or social deviance – throughout history, some people have looked at such things as these in others, denounced them on that basis as having no right to be here, and then proceeded to subject those people to indignity, cruelty, and even torture and death. Our world is replete with times and places where a "we" has identified a "them" as not deserving to be here, and the result, time and again, has been horrendous.

I hasten therefore to emphasize: When I say *we have no right to be here*, I'm not saying that there are some people who have a right to be here and others who don't. Nor am I saying that no one has a right to be here, and that therefore no one has a right to protection against indignity, cruelty, torture, and death at the hands of others.

On the contrary! Through the history of Jesus Christ, which includes the history of the children of Israel, we know God as the creator who is at work in every human life in ways singular to each person, joining that person uniquely to God's good aims and purposes, indeed weaving that person's life into the blessings of God's compassionate care. Through the history of Jesus Christ, which includes the history of the children of Israel, we know God as the creator who has promised us – and, in this sense, given us a right to – certain things from God. God has promised us – and in this sense God has given us a right to – God's goodness and love; God has promised us – and in this sense God has given us a right to – God's guidance and direction; God has promised us – and in this sense God has given us a right to expect – that God will be always with us and for us to help us and to get us where God knows we most deeply need to be going. Out of nothing, God freely created the world, God freely gave us life, and God freely has promised to sustain and guide our relationship with God. In that respect,

God *has* given us a most important right, namely, the right to be confident in the aims and purposes that God is working out among us – the right to be confident in the future that God has in store for us.

However, God did not have to give us that right. God did not owe it to us to give us life; God did not have to make us part of God's creation; God did not have to create our world at all. God did not need us or our world, in order to be God; God did not need our company; God did not need our attention; God did not need anything from us. God simply chose to share God's uncreated being with created beings. God simply chose to let there be temporal beings who could participate in God's eternal goodness. So, we have no *right* to be here, in that God did not owe it to us to give us life. God did not owe it to us to give us existence. Rather, we're here purely and simply because God, in an act of utterly unforced and utterly sovereign freedom, chose to let us be.

It is in that sense that *we have no right to be here*. That does not mean, however, that we have nothing. For, God's word to us through the prophets of Israel, God's word revealed face-to-face in the life and mission of Jesus, is this: In giving us this opportunity to know life, God gives us also this profound promise: "I will be your God, and you shall be my people. And, no matter how far from me you might ever fall, and no matter how far from you I might sometimes seem, I am with you always to create, through and for you, conditions in which all shall thrive and flourish as my beloved children."

The psalmist's realization in his prayer to God – the realization that, though we have no right to be here, God has given us every right to God's goodness and love, to God's guidance and direction, and to God's help – that realization needs in some way to be part of every prayer we offer to God. And, after all, what is that realization but this: recognition that *God is the God of grace*. It is recognition that, without owing us a thing, God has chosen to give us not only the gift of creaturely life, but also participation in God's own eternal life. It is recognition that, while, in an important sense, we have no right to be here, we have every right to trust the aims and purposes that God is working out, in and with and through us, for the sake of the future that God intends.

Again, because God didn't have to give us life, we can't claim to have a right to be here. Nevertheless, we have every right to be confident in God's loving decision to lift us up out of nothing and give us life. We have every right to be confident in God's gracious decision to make possible our participation in God's eternal life. And, so, it is only right that, in all our prayers to God, we should pray in the embrace of this psalmist's prayer: "O Lord, what are we human beings, that you should regard our good with such concern? What are we, that our good is so important to you? We are like a breath: we are present for a moment, and in another moment we are gone. Our time in this world is as fleeting as a passing shadow. We were born, we live a while, and then we die. What is it about us, O God, that we should so matter to you, and that you regard our good so deeply, so compassionately, and forever?" Amen.