

Sing of God's Power

Whenever the Olympic Games roll around and I have a chance to hear the national anthems of many different countries, I'm struck at how peculiar our national anthem is.

To begin with its tune is odd. The title of that tune, by the way, is "To Anacreon in Heaven," and it was written for an 18th century British gentlemen's club as sort their theme song. As anyone who has ever had to sing it knows, it has such a wide range that it's almost impossible to sing well – even trained musicians have to choose their key carefully to make sure they can reach both the bottom and the top notes.

But the words of the "Star-Spangled Banner" are also odd as national anthems go. Our neighbors of the north sing of their devotion to their "home and native land." We sing about a battle in a war that our history classes hardly teach us about—the War of 1812. So why do we sing this song?

As a non-expert in American history, I think it might be that we're simply uninformed when it comes to how important that battle—known as the Battle of Baltimore—actually was to our nation's history. The War of 1812 began less than 40 years after the Declaration of Independence, and it was a test of whether that independence would last. In fact, just a few weeks before Francis Scott Key wrote his poem, on September 14, 1814, British soldiers had occupied

Washington, D.C., and set fire to the White House. And as it turned out the Battle of Baltimore and the Battle of Plattsburgh, which was fought just a few days before it in our old stomping grounds on Lake Champlain, marked the turning point in the war.

So the "Star-Spangled Banner" does, in fact, celebrate an important event. But more than that the words say important things about our national character of persistence, and courage, and sacrifice in the cause of freedom from tyranny.

Psalm 114 is also a national song that celebrates a decisive string of events in Israel's history. But it's different than the "Star-Spangled Banner" in a very important way. It doesn't celebrate the character of the people, but the nature of *the Lord*, who led them out of Egypt and into the Promised Land.

It's a very compactly written poem, and verses 3 and 4 tell the story. Verse 3 describes the parting of the Red Sea at the beginning of the exodus, and the parting of the River Jordan at the end. Verse 4 is a little less obvious, but it is probably remembering the way Mt. Sinai quaked when Moses went up to speak face-to-face with the Lord.

And then verses 4 and 5 ask: Why would the sea flee? Why would the waters of the Jordan turn back? Why would Mt. Sinai leap like a ram? And the answer is that the earth trembles before the power of the Lord, who is mighty to save his people.

This brings us part of the way—this song is a celebration of the saving and liberating power of God. But the Book of Psalms gives us another important clue. We don't often think of it this way, but the Book of Psalms was arranged in the form in which we have it by something like the committees that edit our modern hymnals. And with a few exceptions, our hymnals are usually arranged by topics. For example, our hymnal has categories like “[The] God of Majesty and Power,” “Love and Joy,” and “Witness and Mission.”

Scholars have long recognized that the Book of Psalms can be divided into five major sections. Psalm 114 is in Part V, which begins with Psalm 107 and ends with Psalm 150. If we had to give this section a title, a good one might be something like “Exile and Deliverance.”

In other words, this is a song to be sung not in a time of triumph but in a time of trouble. At the time of the exile in the Babylon, for the people of Israel it must have seemed as if all their glorious history had come undone. They were slaves once again in a far-off land among a people of foreign tongue. They were cut off from the dwelling place of God, the temple of the Lord which lay in ruins back in Jerusalem. But the message of this psalm is that this was a time to remember and celebrate the awesome power of God that makes the earth tremble. This was a time to remember that the Lord had made the people his sanctuary.

Psalm 114 calls attention to extraordinary—we might say miraculous—displays of God's power, the signs and wonders that accompanied his people's

liberation. Of course, we see signs and wonders in Jesus' ministry, too—in his healings, and feeding the multitudes, and turning water into wine, walking on the sea, and above all else his resurrection from dead. And those signs continue in the Book of Acts in the mission of the apostles. But what about today? Do we see such signs and wonders? Should we expect them?

That's a question that's debated among faithful Christians. But we should remember, too, that not all of God's saving acts in the Bible were accompanied by signs and wonders. In fact, when God's time came to lead Israel back from exile, it happened through the very ordinary political events of the ancient Near East. And today, in many of the miracles of healing we witness it's hard to draw a line between the power of prayer and the advances of modern medicine. Our personal stories of salvation run the full gamut from dramatic conversions to the very quiet path of baptism and confirmation and growing into faith. But all these things are evidence of the power of God at work in the world.

The lesson we learn from reading Psalm 114 in its context in the same message we hear in the New Testament. God's power is not a power to dominate and control, but a power to liberate and save. And that power is revealed most clearly in those times when our human powerlessness is most evident. As wonderful as the signs and wonders Jesus performed may have been, to quote a line from Michael Card's song, "El Shaddai," God's "most awesome work was done through the frailty of [his] son."

The same is true for us. In a memorable passage in 2 Corinthians, Paul – who is probably writing about himself—talks about a man who experienced great signs and wonders, who was taken up into Paradise where he heard things too wonderful for any human to repeat. But he goes on to tell of how he had been given a thorn in the flesh that tormented him, and how despite his many prayers the Lord had not taken it away.

But the Lord told him. "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." He continues

So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong. (2 Corinthians 12:9-10 NRSV)

Are you at the end of your strength? It may be time to sing of the power of God! Amen.

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