

The Hope of All Generations

Meta

- ❖ Date: August 4, 2024; Pentecost 11B
- ❖ Location: Apostles Anglican Church

Readings

Exodus 16:2-4 (5-8) 9-15

Psalm 78:1-13 (14-25)

Ephesians 4:17-25

John 6:24-35

Opening

Today our church celebrates our 18th anniversary, and so we read a maskil. What is a maskil? It is a type of psalm, and more specifically a psalm read for a communal festival. The Psalms have been our focus throughout the summer, a sermon series that concludes today. The lectionary aligns well with our local calendar, our annual observance of our church anniversary. Maskils were recited on festive occasions, and so we read and sing Psalm 78.

Strange song for a festive occasion, though, right? Our maskil begins with a strange prologue, 'I will open my mouth in a parable, I will utter **dark sayings** of old.' An odd and ominous way to open a festival, to be sure. But our narrator has opened the proceedings asking for our ears, 'Give ear, O my people, to my teaching; incline your ears to the words of my mouth,' and so we shall.

Section 1

As soon as we begin listening, two things happen: one, we recognize this story as one we've heard before and, two, it makes us uneasy. We squirm in our chairs. These dark events are 'things that we have heard and known, that our fathers have told us.' We heard these stories as kids about our fathers and their fathers before them. And now we're thinking about *our* children. These aren't flattering stories; in fact, they're embarrassing stories of our ancestors. And Asaph, the psalmist of Psalm 78, announces, 'we're going there.'

We will not hide them from their children (us), but tell to the coming generation (our descendants), the glorious deeds of the Lord, and his might, and the wonders he has done.

The prologue announces a paradox—what follows are dark tales from our fathers, but there is a hero and there is beauty emerging from darkness. This is a multigenerational, family saga.

We will not conceal the truth we've known—we will remember our tragic past, we will recount the record of generational sin *because* there is a hero. There can be only one hero. The lone hero of this

story is the Lord: his might, his wonders and the glorious deeds he has done. You can always tell who a family worships. Find the hero of every story and you'll know who the God of the family is.

Israel came from a world of smooth and shiny stories. Take Egypt, take Assyria, take Babylon—all told stories that redacted any shameful behavior of their kings from the public record. Israel defiantly chose a different path, because of the prophets, because of the psalmists. Leave it in. We are not the heroes of this story. Far from it. Don't doctor the history, iron out the kinks, or smooth the sharp edges. If you do that, you'll miss the wonder, the glory of the hero in this story.

My western mind doesn't make sense of this prologue and the bridge into the story itself. Here comes a story about ancestral sin, the sin of the fathers, from the same people who were commanded at Mount Sinai, 'Honor your father and your mother.'¹

And now Asaph turns everything upside down for us logical westerners in verses 5-8. The testimony established in Jacob, the law appointed in Israel, given and transmitted from fathers and mothers to sons and daughters and their unborn children after them—everything was given that **their hope should be in God, that they remember all the mighty works of God and keep his commandments**. And then Asaph turns everything inside out in verse 8:

*And that they should **not** be like their fathers, a stubborn and rebellious generation, a generation whose heart was not steadfast, whose spirit was not faithful to God.*

Asaph hasn't provided many specifics in the story yet. Those are coming soon, but he's giving us a clue to the story. How will children know whether their fathers and mothers have lived honorably? Were our ancestors stubborn and rebellious, or humble and meek? What about their heart? Did they pursue the Lord to the end? What about their spirit? Was it faithful? Don't focus on success or effectiveness. Were they faithful to God? *That's* how children will know whether their children have lived honorably. And here's the thing: with the measure we apply to our ancestors, so will it be applied to us by **our children**.

The Tragedy of Ephraim

The story in the psalm advances to specific scenes in verses 9-16. These are the key events that Asaph refuses to conceal. Asaph doesn't follow a linear approach to Israel's story. Episodes collide and don't fall in a tidy order. As soon as Asaph introduces the Ephraimites, a reference to the era of Saul and David, he'll take us back in time to Egypt *before* the Exodus. In verses 9-11, Asaph remembers 'the Ephraimites, armed with the bow, (who) turned back on the day of battle. They did not keep God's covenant, but refused to walk according to his law. They forgot his works and the wonders that he had shown them.'

The Ephraimites are a nickname for the northern tribes of Israel, especially in the tragic reign of King Saul. Mention these names and they activate entire histories. Oh, the tragedy and treachery of northern Israel. When Ephraimites are mentioned, not only Saul comes to mind, but Shiloh. Shiloh, built to be a sanctuary in the north, the home of the ark of the covenant, God's presence in the midst of Israel before his temple was built in Jerusalem. But the sanctuary of Shiloh became a temple for idols. Micah carved an image and installed at Shiloh where the ark of the covenant was meant to be.

¹ Exodus 20.12

Oh, Shiloh. City and corrupted sanctuary in the days of Eli. Remember Eli's sons, Hophni and Phineas, priests at Shiloh. They were priests who stole from their people, who became thieves of the people. We cannot conceal the deeds of Shiloh, of Hophni and Phineas, for they were a stubborn and rebellious generation, whose heart was not steadfast, whose spirit was not faithful to God.

When Shiloh was desecrated, the Lord called a boy, Samuel, to be his prophet. Samuel would anoint Saul to be king over Israel because Israel demanded a king to feel safe and secure. The story of Saul ought to remind us that our most fervent political ideas may well become our undoing. Israel's desire for Saul was her maneuver to be saved through politics, not the mighty hand of God.

And thus we come to the end of 1 Samuel and an episode that explains what Asaph meant when he said, 'The Ephraimites, armed with the bow, turned back on the day of battle.'

Families have abilities and skills, so the Ephraimites were known for their military abilities, specifically the specialized skill of archery. Embattled in war with the Philistines—the nation of fallen Goliath, the archenemy of Israel because of her pantheon of false gods—the Ephraimites retreat from the Philistines in 1 Samuel 31. Think of that: the shepherd boy, David, dropped Goliath to the ground with a river rock, and now the Ephraimites retreat from Goliath's nation

Now the Philistines were fighting against Israel, and the men of Israel fled before the Philistines and fell slain on Mount Gilboa.

Not only the infantry fell on Mount Gilboa, but king Saul died on that battlefield. Oh Ephraim, Shiloh, and Saul. Let us remember the danger of idols in our story. Idols always lead to downfall and ruin. Let us renounce the idols of our ancestors. Let our children renounce false gods in their generation.

The Danger of a Hardened Heart

The mention of Ephraimites is a potent, but passing reference for Asaph. Most of his memory in this psalm returns to the desert wilderness. The deserts of Egypt when Israel was freed from captivity; the desert of the Sinai wilderness when Israel was tested after her liberation from Pharaoh. When our fathers stood at the shoreline of the Red Sea, with Pharaoh's chariots baring down on them with the sword, the Lord

divided the sea and let our fathers pass through it, and he made the waters stand like a heap.

I keep saying 'our fathers' because they are. We must not think otherwise. This is our story. St Paul says as much to the Corinthian church

*"For I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that **our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink.** For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ. Nevertheless, with most of them God was not pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness." (1 Corinthians 10:1–5, ESV)*

The story is ancient and current. The patterns in the wilderness of long ago persist in the wilderness times and spaces of our stories. We do not observe this story. This is our story—these are our mothers and fathers. That is why we take this psalm and this story so seriously.

When our mothers and fathers tested God in the wilderness saying, ‘Can God spread a table in the wilderness?’ so will we be tested with the same question. When your soul begins asking ‘Can God...?’ Asaph says to you—remember the desert of Sinai! We cannot conceal these things. The Lord struck water from a rock. He rained down manna from heaven. They ate the bread of angels, food in *abundance*, yet it was not enough to make them trust the Lord.

Miracles, signs and wonders, are demonstrations of God’s power, but remember the story—miracles aren’t enough for Israel. They might satisfy a hunger, then spike a new craving. Now we want quail! And the reason this psalm and this story is so important is that we see the outcome when we get our craving. It doesn’t bring rest. Israel craved quail in the wilderness; then craved a king. Both the quail and Saul turned out to be a plague upon the people.

The warning Asaph announces in these episodes is the danger of a hardened heart.

That’s the vulnerability of living in the wilderness—one either draws near to the Lord in humility, or one turns back from the Lord in hardness of heart. That’s the record Asaph implores us to remember. Do not let it be so with your generation and your children. Teach your children the word of God. Remind them how patient and loving the Lord has been with our fathers and mothers. Recount the signs and wonders of his provision in the wilderness.

To Love the Word

The heartfelt prayer of this psalm cries out in verses 6-7. We long that the next generation and their children after them would set their hope in God, remember his works, and keep his commandments.

I marvel at the vision of Scripture. When we see a newborn baby, Asaph would have us pray for obedience for that child’s children.

And the prayer is faithfulness, a tender heart that keeps the ways of God.

I know this psalm is a heavy one. It’s a tough subject, and in some ways I would have liked a brighter psalm for our church anniversary and my final Sunday before sabbatical. But the more I draw near to the heart of Asaph’s story and his prayer, the more I hear him express a deep desire I’ve carried near to my heart for Apostles, especially these past 6 months or so.

My heart cries out that every man, woman, and child at Apostles would cherish the Word of God. That we would hunger for the Word of God. That we would teach our children to cherish the Word of God. That our children would *lovethe* Word of God.

I am not speaking about worship of the Bible. Far from it. If one of the greatest threats every generation faces is hardness of heart—and it is—then the chief concern for our children out to be **the affections** of their hearts. What will their soul love? Dark and heavy tale though Psalm 78 be, I can think of no better prayer on the occasion of our 18th anniversary. Let us pray that we and our children would love the Lord and cherish his Word.

We train and instruct our children in the words of Scripture, but many a child were trained with facts about Scripture, but *their affections* weren’t shaped. They haven’t been awakened.

I’m a priest and I realize I don’t love Scripture like I ought. I discover it every time I pray Psalm 119. ‘How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!’ ‘My eyes shed streams of

tears, because people do not keep your law.' 'The law of your mouth is better to me than thousands of gold and silver pieces.' Oh give me affections like that. I don't have it but I want that heart. And even more, give these affections to our children. This is the best defense when our children enter the wilderness. And they will. We can't pretend otherwise. But a steadfast heart, clinging to the Word of God—this is how our Lord Jesus was trained to withstand the wilderness.

Every saint should pray that our children—and I mean biological and spiritual children—would surpass us in holiness.

I stand here today with tremendous gratitude for the faithfulness of the founding families and individuals of Apostles Anglican Church. I honor our parish mothers and fathers because they have treasured the word of God, they have pursued humility. But as much as I honor our founding and present members, I pray that our children and our children's children would surpass us.

In his majestic poem, *France Must Go On*, the French Catholic poet Charles Peguy speaks in the voice of an aging father pondering the future of his sons:

*His three children who are growing so fast,
Let us hope they don't fall ill,
And who will certainly be taller than he
(How proud he is of them in his heart),
And his two boys are going to be powerfully strong,
His two boys will replace him, his children will take his place on earth,
When he is no longer there,
His place in the parish and his place in the forest,
His place in church and his place at home,
His place in the market-town and his place in
the vineyard,
And in the plain, and on the hillside, and in the valley,
His place in Christendom, don't you know,
His place as a man and his place as a Christian,
His place as a parishioner, his place as a ploughman,
His place as a peasant,
His place as a father,
His place as a son of Lorraine and France,
**Because, good Lord, those are places which have to be kept
And all that must go on,
When he is no longer there, just as it is going on now,
if not better;**²*

² Charles Peguy, *Saints and Sinners*, 94.

Oh, I want to be faithful and love the Word. And even more I want our children and their children yet to be born to surpass us in faithfulness, devotion, wisdom, and love for God. Is this not what the psalms teach us to desire?

A Season Apart

Later today, we'll gather for an Anniversary Party here at the church to celebrate 18 years as an Anglican parish. And then, tomorrow I will begin a sabbatical that will extend until November 24th. I will return for worship to celebrate the Eucharist at both services on Christ the King Sunday, November 24th. The next time I preach will be on the first Sunday of Advent. I leave with Psalm 78 and then my first sermon after returning will be meditations on the end of the world; of signs in sun, moon, and stars and the distress of nations. So save the date now!

It's a strange gift to have Psalm 78 on this occasion, our church anniversary and the advent of a sabbatical. For this psalm directs our attention to the future—to generations coming after us. My heart and mind has not only been preparing for 3 ½ months away. Simultaneously to sabbatical planning, I've been praying and preparing for 2025 with our staff and vestry. I'm very excited about plans for 2025 because the theme of next year will be empowering the laity. We'll be focused on empowering laity with a theology of work, for service in the church, for discerning their vocations in the Kingdom of God. There's a fire within me to pursue these things in the year ahead, even as I'm on the doorstep of a sabbatical.

Closing

But there's a much grander vision given to us in this psalm, greater than one season or one year. That greater vision is not only that we think beyond ourselves, beyond our lifetimes, placing the generations to come as our prime concern. There is a Gospel ending to this psalm that began as a dark tale. It's the only way our fathers and mothers are redeemed; it's the only hope for our children and our children's children. We find that ending in the final three verses of Psalm 78, verses 70-72:

*He chose David his servant and took him from the sheepfolds; from following the nursing ewes he brought him to shepherd Jacob his people, Israel his inheritance. **With upright heart he shepherded them and guided them with his skillful hand.***³

Our psalmist, Asaph, brings his dark, winding tale to conclusion speaking of King David. But how can we not see the fulfillment of this story resting with the David's greatest son, our Lord Jesus Christ? He is the answer to all the shadowy episodes of our story, the source of all glory and wonder. *With upright heart our Lord Jesus Christ shepherded them and guided them with his skillful hand.*

This is how we tell the story of our lives! This is the way families find a way through all the pain they endure. This is how we speak to our descendants of our past. This is how Apostles Anglican Church understands 18 years of life together and hope for the future: *With upright heart our Lord Jesus Christ shepherded us and guided us with his skillful hand.* Christ Jesus is the shepherd of Apostles Anglican Church, no matter who is installed as rector; regardless of who serves as assisting clergy, or vestry or wardens. Christ Jesus is the shepherd of Apostles Anglican Church. His skillful hand has and will guide

³ Psalm 78.70-72

us. He alone is mighty, he alone is glorious and able to accomplish wonders. Oh, Lord we are weak and we fail, but we are yours.

We are not the heroes of our story. Our fathers are not the heroes. There is one Redeemer who feeds us and saves us in the wilderness. One Redeemer who shepherds us through dark valley. One Redeemer whose love endures all our failures, who heals all our infirmities. One Redeemer and Shepherd who guides each generation with skillful hand.

So let us glorify him. I close with a doxology from John Mason Neale as I have done so often in this summer in the Psalms:

*Glory be to the FATHER of David; glory be to the SON, Who is David; glory be to the HOLY GHOST, Who is the abundance of the pastures of David the Shepherd. As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be: world without end. Amen.*⁴

⁴ J. M. Neale and R. F. Littledale, eds., *A Commentary on the Psalms from Primitive and Mediæval Writers: Psalm 39 to Psalm 80, vol. 2* (London; New York: Joseph Masters; Pott and Amery, 1868), 522.