

It seems an odd text to read on Mother's Day: God, the warrior king, omnipotent and omniscient, subdues all foes, and takes His rightful place at the throne; Mama sets the table and puts out the finest china and white, crisp linens, and the band plays a rousing version of *Hail to the Chief*; And everybody and everything on Earth, mamas and daddies, and aunts and uncles, little ones, trees, rocks, rivers, even oceans shout their halle-halle-halles to affirm the arrival of our righteous judge.

Yeah, it's not exactly what I wrote on my Hallmark card to Jacqueline this morning, nor on the notes we sent the other mothering figures in our household. But, wow, I think this text, received on this particular morning, offers us an opportunity to reframe a few things.

What's most apparent to me is a tension that inculcates our society today, and indeed every age of history: we keep tempering love and grace with demonstrations of power and wealth; we keep giving away our humanity in exchange for the security of institutions. And in so doing we end up with benevolent, good-hearted billionaires; pharaohs who are just doing their jobs; Pax Romana, or Pax Americana, or Pax insert your own domain. We excuse the use of humanity's most destructive habits in order to forge institutions that seek to heal the very problems they initiate.

So, yes indeed, Mr. Psalmist, let's sing a new song, and yes, please, let's tell everybody and everything about the marvelous wonders our Creator has done. But if we're gonna sing a new song, can we please stop singing it in the same old ways. Because for far too long, the imagination, the openness, the marvel, the radical love and inclusion of our Maker has been drowned out by too many of the tired, predictable, and institutionalized words of our past.

Israel believed (and too often so do we!) that if it could just install the right king, the right warrior, the right leader, the right judge, the system would resolve itself. For surely God is revealed in the prosperity of His people, in the prestige of His people, in the might of His people. Right?

I don't think we should sing that song anymore. Because we know the story of One who came, not to restore broken systems, but instead, One who came to help humanity reclaim its identity as God's created and beloved children. The world says, "You need a king who can pound his fists; you need a king who's got a rigid sense of justice; you need a king who can implement an economic policy that ensures the stability and longevity of a vassal system; you need a king that can so order his dominion that everyone and everything can be manipulated on a string."

And yet, Jesus came in a way that emptied himself of every quality associated with a traditional king: he turned the other cheek; he fulfilled the law instead of weaponizing it; he railed against the abuses of the temple's economic structures; he ignored societal protocols and positioning; He was neither a mother nor a father, and yet he offered parental love to all he encountered. And most of all, he did not come to judge the world; instead, he came to create a world so centered on compassion and empathy for neighbor, that eventually, that world would no longer stay beholden to litigation.

The Psalmist sings an old song – it tells us the world takes notice of God, chooses to enthrone God, because of God's demonstration of power.

I think we need to sing a new song: God loves the world, and it's God's love that is the essence of power, it's God's love that orders us, and frees us, and empowers us to realize our potential.

Don't get me wrong, I wanna hear the seas roar, and the floods clap their hands, the hills sing for joy, and a whole host of trumpets and lyres join in a triumphant song. But I'm not interested in cosmic parlor tricks – If God is zipping and zapping about to create a laser and light show, that's not majesty, it's manipulation. And in the most dangerous of situations, such a theology leads people to believe their conformity to earthly kingdoms is a tangible expression of their love for God. And even worse, a reliance on such monarchical and patriarchal systems infects every other system right down to households and families. Loving God becomes obeying priest, householder, husband, father, brother, etc.

Me personally, I don't see God in the smiting of armies, or in a long vindictive hand, or sitting on a powerful golden throne with a pointy crown high up in the sky. And I certainly don't see God in the subjugation of one group or groups of people to another. But that doesn't mean I don't see power and majesty in God. I just see God more in expressions of empowered humanity than I do in coercive systems or aggressive postures.

I experience God's steadfast love in the story of Miriam, first as a child, protecting her little brother Moses, and later as his advisor, voicing her authentic sense of justice and truth, both to him and God, even at her great peril. I see God's steadfast love revealed in Esther, willing to sacrifice her privilege and standing as the king's wife, in order to protect a faithful people from the cruel intentions of Haman. I see God's creativity in Abigail, who brokers peace with David, a ruler more inclined to demonstrate God's power with a long and heavy arm. I see God's steadfast love in children who find warm embrace in the arms of Jesus, the one whose kin-dom is accessible to all.

Here's what I'm getting at: our faith history is full of stories of people who determined to offer their neighbors and enemies both compassion and empathy. In so doing, they created environments where a singular judge of righteousness was replaced with an environment of righteousness: communities living in mutuality and partnership. And all of these stories and people are demonstrative of a present and loving God.

So...let's put it all together. The psalmist is right – God's steadfast love has endured in every generation. But let's also look past this morning's psalm. God's steadfast love is experienced, revealed, and demonstrated beyond the battlefield, and beyond authoritative systems. God's steadfast love is engendered in the equipping of righteous people to live righteously, and to create an ever-expanding environment of righteousness. And if that's the case, people not only live with one another in righteousness, but they expand their righteousness to include relationship with all of creation.

God loves us, and that love grants us value. Steeped in God's love, we love one another, and we extend that love beyond our neighbors to the lands we inhabit,

Singing a New Psalm
Bob Stillerman
Sixth Sunday of Easter, 5-7-2021
Psalm 98



a spiritually
progressive
community
of faith

to the vegetation we tend, to the creatures we live alongside, to the waters we drink, and the air we breathe.

And as we sing about such things, it's not hard to imagine an impromptu, and completely authentic chorus: a congregation of happy singers, joined with all sorts of instruments, not to mention roaring seas, and clapping rains, and joyful, dancing hills, and all kinds of critters barking, and croaking, and howling.

Joy to the world, y'all. The Lord is come. It's an old message, but tried and true. May we always seek ways to sing this song anew. And may we be a people who both recognize and demonstrate the presence of God in expressions of love for one another.

Amen.