

**CALLING ALL ANGELS**  
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Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

*Based on Psalm 78:1-7; A Re-Telling of the National Anthem*

Our Scripture Lesson this morning takes us to a time of division and decline in ancient Israel: two hundred years after the glory days of Kings David and Solomon. There are competing claims on political power. There are competing agendas among religious elites. There are global threats de-stabilizing everyone. The people are demoralized and desperate for some indication of continued divine favor.

Into the void steps the composer of Psalm 78, most likely a teacher of wisdom. Who calls the people to the better angels of their nature with a song of the story of how they came to be. A song somewhat similar to “My Country ‘Tis of Thee” or “Lift Every Voice and Sing” would be for us today.

Our lesson includes the prelude of this song: the first seven verses of a hymn ten times that long.

I offer this prelude of Psalm 78 in my own interpretive translation:

Listen, my people, to my teaching;  
    pay attention to the words I say.  
I am going to share with you a parable;  
    to tell you the mystery of our origins,  
    passed down from our ancestors;  
    the story we *think* we already know.

This re-telling of the story of our origins  
    will continue to teach our children to praise God.  
The re-telling of the story of our origins  
    will not conceal the truth of God’s glorious deeds,  
    and God’s might, and the wonders God has done.

This re-telling of the story of our origins  
    will *broaden* that truth.

Yes, God delivered us from the bondage of slavery in Egypt  
Yes, God led us to freedom in a land flowing with milk and honey.  
Yes, this incredible story of triumph is true!

It is also true that, along the way,  
    God *bound us together* in covenant community  
    with God and with one another.

It is also true that,

along the way to the land of freedom,  
God established expectations  
for how we would live:  
with justice and equity and right relationship,  
with love of God and love of one another  
at the center of our common life.

Along the way to the land of freedom,  
God and our ancestors bound themselves to one another,  
like wedding vows in a marriage.  
Not only that, they promised to perpetuate the marriage,  
the gift of covenant community,  
through the next generation,  
to us,  
and through us to our children,  
and through them to their children,  
so that each generation should set their hope in God,  
and not forget what God has done,  
but maintain fidelity with the covenant community.

Yes, freedom.  
*And* responsibility.

*This* is the true story of our origins.

Through these words, may we hear a Word of Hope. Amen.

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“Democracy,” said Winston Churchill, in a speech to the British House of Commons, “is the worst form of Government ... except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.”

We know this in the Presbyterian world, where we, too, are governed by a form of representative democracy. In fact, our very name – Presbyterian – refers to our form of representative democratic government. It is our very identity.

In the Presbyterian world we say we believe in “the priesthood of all believers.” This radical notion that each one of us bears the image of God. That each one of us maintains equal access to God. That each one of us cultivates equal potential to minister on behalf of God. And therefore, each one of us bears the God-given right to participate in decisions that affect us.

Representative democracy is inherent in our theology.

On the flip side, we also believe that no single one of us bears the image of God without flaw. That no single one of us maintains access to God without flaw. That no single one of us cultivates the potential to minister on

behalf of God without flaw. And therefore, each one of us needs the wisdom and perspective of the other in order to bear the image of God in its fullness. Each one of us needs the wisdom and perspective of the other in order to access the wisdom of God in its fullness. Each one of us needs the wisdom and perspective of the other in order to minister on behalf of God in God's fullness.

Commitment to community is therefore also inherent in our theology.

These twin convictions – the God-given right for each individual to participate in decisions that affect them AND the God-given responsibility to discern our path together in community – have grounded our commitment, since our inception, to representative democracy in both church and society.

The American Revolution, you have heard me say before, is also known as the Presbyterian revolution. With an estimated two thirds of the revolutionary army coming from congregations linked to the Reformed tradition. A Presbyterian minister signed the Declaration of Independence. Another one led the funeral procession for Abraham Lincoln. Presbyterian ministers and elders helped write state and national constitutions. Not just in this country but around the world. Not just in the past but even to this day.

Representative democracy as the ideal form of government is written in our DNA.

And in theory, it is a beautiful way to live. In theory the God-given right for each individual to participate in decisions that affect them AND the God-given responsibility to discern our path together in community sounds idyllic. But, as Churchill concludes, it can be devastating in practice. Not because representative democracy itself is destructive. But because we are.

The whole truth, the “broadened” truth, as our Psalmist says, beyond the story we think we already know of the origins of our representative democracy, the story we have been unearthing here at SPC these past several years, the story we have been living in our nation these past four hundred years, reveals our utter failure to live up to the promises of our origins.

Guided, as we have been, by this truly radical notion of the priesthood of all believers, this truly paradigm-shifting conviction of the inherent worth and dignity of all people, both American and Presbyterian representative democracies in our origins sanctioned two sins that still plague us today: the genocide and exile of indigenous peoples and the perpetual enslavement of African peoples. All based on a worldview of white supremacy originating right around the time in world history that both Presbyterian and American representative democracies were forming.

We know this. We have been confessing this at SPC for a while.

We know the true story of our origins, the broadened truth of our origins, as the psalmist says, the song we must sing of our origins in our divided and perhaps declining nation today is just as fraught for us as the broadened truth song of origins for the people of ancient Israel in Psalm 78.

And yes, that Psalm 78 is incredibly fraught.

This broadened truth song of origins for the people of ancient Israel does celebrate their origins, yes, the same way we should and do celebrate ours. The story really is true, the psalmist sings. Yes, God really did deliver our ancestors from the bondage of slavery in Egypt. The story really is true, the psalmist sings. Yes, God really did lead our ancestors through the danger of the desert. The story really is true, the psalmist sings. Yes, God really did lead our ancestors joyfully to freedom in a land flowing with milk and honey.

Alleluia! All of that is true!

AND, the psalmist laments, it is *also* true that our ancestors messed up royally! Greedy and ungrateful, our ancestors demanded ever more than the goodness God would always provide. Full of pride and driven by lust, our ancestors gave lip-service to the majesty of God and then hoarded for themselves at the expense of the poor. Stubborn and rebellious, our ancestors forgot what God had done for them and turned toward every other thing they thought would save them, but never could.

We are not much better today, the psalmist laments. We lament. No wonder we are divided and in decline.

But God is not done with us yet, the Psalmist says, to them and to us. We can learn from our mistakes, the psalmist insists, we can learn from the mistakes of those who came before. This decline and division can become instead a springboard of hope!

And here's how, the psalmist says, to them and to us: Over and over again, the psalmist sings, God has still been with us through it all. Over and over again, the psalmist sings, God has still led us through it all. Over and over again, the psalmist says, God still finds a way to begin again with us through it all.

Including today!

The whole point of this song of our origins, the psalmist says, to them and to us, is offering hope in the midst of this challenge. The whole point of this song of our origins the psalmist says, is reminding us that change is possible. That we can repent, in the classic definition of that word: that we can still change our hearts and minds, we can still change our way of life, in order to live more faithfully as God's Beloved Community.

The whole point of this song of our origins, the psalmist says, to them and to us, is reminding us that God has indeed broken us free from bondage, not because *we* are so good but because GOD is so good. And God will do it again! That God has indeed led us all to a land of promise and plenty, to learn how to live as free people, bound together in love, not because the leaders we elect in a representative democracy are so good, but because GOD is so good. And God will do it again!

But if there is any hope at all for us, in this land of promise and plenty, the psalmist concludes, we must continue to update the promises of covenant community. *All* of us. If there is any hope at all for us, in this land of promise and plenty, the psalmist concludes, we must perpetuate – *and update* – God's expectations of justice and equity and right relationship among us. From generation to generation. From election to election. With love of God and love of one another at the center of our common life. Including the ones who are hard to love. Including the ones we think are just plain wrong. Including the ones who have hurt us so much we want to hurt them back.

If there is any hope at all for us, in this land of promise and plenty, the psalmist concludes, for them and for us, we must keep changing our hearts and minds, we must keep renewing the vows of this marriage until this ever more perfect union our ancestors established – with all of its flaws and all of its promise – truly does become a provisional demonstration of God’s dream for us all.

So let’s get to work!

Amen.