

Story and Meditation: Let God Rise Up

May 24, 2020

Seventh Sunday of Easter

Psalm 68:1-10, 32-35

by *Eric Anderson*

There once was a saffron finch who wanted to change his feathers.

That was a shame, because they were bright and golden and lustrous in the sun. You could see their glory for miles, which is an exaggeration but it played right into the reason he wanted to change to something else. You see, he had put together a list of enemies, and many of those enemies, he believed, would use his bright colors against him.

At the top of the list he put the 'io and the pueo. Hawks and owls, now: they have sharp eyes and, to be sure, you might think it easier to see yellow feathers in the bushes than, perhaps, the green wings of the mejiro. Also on the enemies list: mongoose and rats, who would try to eat his mate's eggs. Any bird that was significantly bigger than he was went on the list as well: 'auku'u, egrets, nene, even though they didn't interfere with him at all. Still, they were big and they were scary. Mynas went on the list for being loud and lots of them.

Even the inoffensive kolea went on the list for eating in the same spot and having brown speckled feathers. If an 'io was hunting for kolea, he thought, it would notice the bright yellow bird first.

I don't have the words to describe what he thought of people.

It was a long list of enemies. Sometimes it had him near-paralyzed and trembling in some greenery. At other times he would fly and hop about with an over-risky bravado, almost begging for a predator to notice him. It was not good.

His best friend came to find him in the palms one day. She got him to share out the entire list, one enemy after another.

"OK," she said. "That's a lot of enemies. Have you made a list of your friends?"

Well, no, he hadn't.

"Try doing that," she said. "See if it makes things seem a little better."

When he did, he started by putting her right at the top. There were his parents, of course, and the brothers and sisters with whom he'd hatched and shared a nest. There were the friends he'd made while feeding. The list of friends started getting longer.

As he thought about it, some creatures started to move from one list to the other. The kolea, for instance, became a friend because, when he thought about it, they helped him to find food. The mynas, he realized, would sometimes chase an 'io away.

As his friends list got longer, his enemies list got shorter. The world hadn't really changed – there are still dangers out there for a saffron finch – but it was no longer such a nightmare to consider. Rather than fearing all the enemies, he grew to delight in the knowledge of his friends.

I confess that I'm feeling the impulse to put together an enemies list myself.

At the top of the list would go the coronavirus. It has slain 335,000 people around the world and nearly 100,000 people in the United States as of this weekend. The front page of the New York *Times* today is simply a list of names of those who have died: tens of thousands of names.

We did very well to restrain its spread in this state and on this island since March such that we've suffered 17 deaths and around 650 diagnosed patients. Other places in the nation, and other places in the world, have not done so well.

Put the coronavirus on the list.

Put those who prioritize their power over their compassion on the list. That's a large group. It includes the men who commit sexual assault and misconduct and those who excuse it by saying, "boys will be boys." It includes those who abuse their spouses, children, and elders physically, financially, and emotionally. It includes those who refuse to use sensible precautions against spreading a highly transmissible disease. It includes those who bring firearms to state capitol buildings. It includes those who justify the detention of children seeking refugee status.

I could go on. I can make a long list.

And then I want to go right to verse one of Psalm 68 and shout, "Let God rise up, let God's enemies be scattered; let those who hate God flee away." Oh, yes. Goodbye, coronavirus. Goodbye, abusers. Goodbye, those who threaten others' lives. Flee away, flee away. That will bring me right into verse 3, when the righteous are joyful, exulting before God, jubilant with joy.

I could get right into that.

This is one of the dangers of the Psalms in general and Psalm 68 among them: They can set up a "me against the world" state of mind, one that assembles a list of enemies and declares God's war against them. We declare ourselves to be the favored of God, and other human beings to be the enemies of God.

The enemies of God. The enemies of God. When did we receive the power to choose the enemies of God?

I'll give you the answer: I'm pretty sure that we didn't.

Since we didn't, we also set ourselves up for a spiritual crisis. If God doesn't crush our enemies, if they're not fleeing before us, we decide that our prayers aren't effective, that our faith is irrelevant, that God doesn't care. We have enough material for spiritual crisis in our lives without creating one for ourselves. A prayer that assumes our enemies are God's is almost certain to be answered with a "No." It will leave our faith scattered, not our enemies.

Remember that one of the purposes of Jesus' ministry was to bring all people to God as friends.

God, says the Psalmist, is more than a successful leader of a divine army. God is the father of orphans and protector of widows. God gives the desolate a home to live in. God leads out the prisoners to prosperity. God brings the rain in a land where water was scarce and precious. Think Kona, not Hilo.

God is a God whose character is expressed in generosity and compassion.

J. Clinton McCann writes at Working Preacher, "Psalm 68 invites the people of God in all times and places to praise God by practicing the same compassion that characterizes God's activity in the world. Only those who practice divine compassion can rightly claim that 'God is on our side.'"

Indeed.

Practicing compassion is not always easy. Sometimes knowing the best means of compassion is a challenge. People understand different approaches differently. Even when our hearts are in the same place, our minds may not be.

Sometimes, it must be said, extending compassion to those who need it is profoundly difficult. For one thing, we can be wrong about what our compassion looks like to them. There is a curious American disdain for "charity." It can look condescending or like a "feels good but makes no difference" non-effort. Compassion that disregards the feedback of the very real people at the margins – well, it just doesn't work, does it?

Sometimes compassion cannot be expressed as we desire. I ache to give a handshake to all of you. I would love to give a hug to those who want one. And... I can't. It may put actual lives at risk. I don't want our church to become a headline like those we've seen in recent days: "Thirty worshipers sent to hospital after church service." More than that: I love you too much to risk your lives and your health that way. UCC Member in Discernment Tena Nock-Hope said it very well on Twitter this week: "Re-opening churches too soon is a modern day Golden Calf... nothing good can or will come from it...."

It's rather unusual to preach on the Psalms, but you may have noticed I've done it more often in this coronaseason. It's because the Psalms, including 68, speak to the disappointments and dangers of life while still looking to God. The Psalms don't give up on faith. Time and time again, as here in Psalm 68, they return to the memories of God's support and restoration as a source of hope for the current situation. God freed us from Egypt, says the Psalm. We will survive. God protected us from the invasion of Sisera, says Psalm 68; we will endure. God brought us rain; we will drink our fill.

We have more stress and deprivation to endure. If the pandemic ended tomorrow, we would still face other illnesses, other injuries. We would still have a society that needs a witness to justice. We would still have children to teach, elders to honor, crops to grow, work to do. And we do all of that with God in our midst, in our spirits, in our hearts.

Melissa Bane Sevier writes at *Contemplative Viewfinder*, "Whatever and whenever our end might be, it isn't yet. We can spend our time wishing, dreaming of a world to come, or we can see what's right in front of us. We can look up, or we can look around. We can hope in a life to come in the future, or we can realize that hope also has a quality of immediacy."

"Awesome is God in his sanctuary," wrote the Psalmist, "he gives power and strength to his people."

"Gives." Present tense. Right here and right now. With me. With you. With us all.

Amen.