

This discussion starter began as “Day 28” of my reflections on the Bible passages suggested on the church’s Web sight, on the Inspirational page, “Bible Passages to Read and Know.” Reading one and writing my reflections on it is a personal exercise I do, not every day, but whenever I am able to grab enough time in the early morning.

Psalm 95:1-7 (NRSV)

O come, let us sing to the Lord; let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!
Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving; let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise!

For the Lord is a great God, and a great King above all gods.

In his hand are the depths of the earth; the heights of the mountains are his also.

The sea is his, for he made it, and the dry land, which his hands have formed.

O come, let us worship and bow down, let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker!

For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand. O that today you would listen to his voice!

For me, the key statement comes in verse 7: “For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture and the sheep of his hand.” That affirmation of the covenant relationship explains the reason to rejoice before the Creator of the world. Otherwise, we might rejoice when life is good and pleasant for us, but there is much in this world and in our lives here that offers no cause for joy or celebration. It is not apparent to the objective observer of either nature or human life that: (1) there is a Creator or (2) that, if there is, the Creator is good and cares about us. True, the person who already knows God and has faith can find much in life and in the world to confirm trust in God’s goodness and compassion, and the person who lives by faith can even find much that transforms life’s hard and bitter experiences into matters of grace that lead us to understanding and compassion for people who suffer; but the objective person can offer much evidence that weighs against joy and celebration. Life hurts, and there is much in it that seems cruel and senseless.

In his poem, “Design,” Robert Frost describes the way a moth is lured to a spider’s web almost, it seems, by chance or fate. How do so many factors come together to ensnare that moth? He concludes, “What but design of darkness to appall,/ if design govern in a thing so small?”

The scientist, of course, knows the scientific answer: there are many, many moths flying around in that night and many, many spider webs. The odds that no moth would be caught in a web would be astronomical. Frost is poking dour fun at people who blithely suggest it should be obvious to all that life in this world happens by God’s design and so should be clear to everyone there “is a God.” If so, Frost suggests, then we must ask the question, “What kind of God designs this world?” The “best of all possible worlds” theory offers proof of God’s being or compassion only to people whose lives are going well, who are (as one psalmist puts it) well-fed, sleek, and comfortable. Thankfully, the Bible does not see this as “the best of all possible worlds,” but as the troubled world God is working to redeem.

The Israelites knew Yahweh God as the one who cared about them in the shame of their slavery, who bore the shame of being identified (and scorned by the pharaoh) as a slave-god, and who delivered them from humiliation and bondage. At first, the Israelites had as no sense either that (1) there was only one God and this Yahweh was not just one among many or (2) that their Savior God was also the Creator. As far as they knew at the outset, there were many gods and this God named Yahweh was just one of the many, the one who happened to care about slaves. They were rather similar in this regard to the man in John 9 who had been born blind. Jesus negates his disciples' debate over who sinned, the man or his parents. Then Jesus heals him. The Pharisees are outraged, and they question the man about this Jesus and what the formerly blind man thinks of him. At one point, the man answers them, "All I know is that I was blind, and now I see." That's the way it begins for Israel: all they know is that they had been slaves without dignity or hope, and now they are free and being led on their way to a land of their own. They are not alone in a world ruled by gods of power with their favored mortals who rule on earth. There is a god who cares about them. That this god is the one God they will learn as they go.

In ancient societies where theology began with creation and nature, it seemed obvious that the gods favored those in power, having designed the world to be as it is. Egypt had such a theology. The pharaoh was a son of the gods, and so by divine right he sat atop the social structure and governed it. Each group of lesser people was fixed by divine will in its proper place, with slaves at the bottom. Slaves were created for the "humble" life of servitude to their masters. It was a neat theological system for those in power because it justified and sanctified their privileged position, and it condemned as enemies of the gods any of the lesser people who dared protest. So, we can see why the pharaoh dismisses Moses and Aaron as ridiculous troublemakers when they ask him to let the Israelites go. Who is this God called Yahweh, God of slaves, and why should pharaoh, the son of the high and respectable gods, listen to this slave-god? In his view, to be the god of shameful people was to be a shameful god. This theology declared the god of the successful to be the greatest god, as proved by his people's success. That's a great theology – for the successful. It's not so good for the rest of humanity.

This "god of the way things are" does not belong in Christian faith. Still, churches here in the United States wrote "slave catechisms" designed to teach the African slaves that the God and Father of Jesus Christ made them to be slaves, and so to please the Christian God they should be good, hard-working, and obedient slaves. I would like to say that such a twisted way of doing theology has been left behind by Christianity, but I would not be telling the truth. Those in control are always tempted to make God seem to be the authority and power that justifies their control over others who must, to please God, submit to them.

The Israelites knew Yahweh God first as their Redeemer, their Savior God. Only over time did they realize their Redeemer from slavery was also the Creator who had stooped to them to be identified with them in their shame. Here we see that the cross is not a suddenly new thing in the history of God's love for Israel and for humanity. Jesus' acceptance of our shame follows God's long-standing way of entering into the actual conditions of human life and working with people for the redemption of this world.

“For he is our God.” The sin or rebellion of humanity is denying God as our God. “You will be as gods, knowing good and evil,” the temptation promises (Genesis 3). And the first result of reaching for that false promise is shame (Oops, we’re naked! We have to cover up!).

Last night, in our confirmation course, I told the kids that in worship we affirm God as our God and present ourselves as people God loves. Psalm 95 makes this affirmation. The Creator is none other than our Redeemer God, the God of the covenant. Then, importantly, it makes the plea that today – this day at hand, given to us by God – we will listen to Yahweh God’s voice. To “listen in voice” is the Hebrew way of saying to obey. But this obedience comes, not from fear of the all-powerful Creator, but from trust in the love and compassion of the Redeemer God who stoops to be with us in our shame and lifts us out of it – not to arrogance, but to life by God’s grace. God wants obedience in trust, not in fear or greed.

“He [Christ] emptied himself, taking the form of a servant.” (Philippians 2) The God whom Jesus represents to us in his self-emptying to be with us, to become one of us, and even to give himself for us, is our God, and this same God is also our Creator and the world’s. What we celebrate and trust is not the power of a creator who justifies life and social structures as they are, who favors the powerful and privileged, and who sanctifies their policies and pretensions, but the redemptive love of God whose Servant Christ gave himself for us. So, we are committed to grace and all the changes it makes in human life and societies, not to the sanctification of the *status quo*. But the changes made by grace cannot be made by force. Power will not serve us in seeking to serve God’s will. Jesus has given us the form of the servant as our way of life, ministry, and influence in the world.