



breadfortheworld
HAVE FAITH. END HUNGER.

January 29, 2012 Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

By Kenyatta R. Gilbert

Deuteronomy 18:15–20

Psalm 111

1 Corinthians 8:1–13

Mark 1:21–28

Introduction

While the themes in the readings for today are quite different, they all cohere around dynamics that make for faithful—and unfaithful—community. Deuteronomy assures the community that God will provide them with a prophetic leader in the tradition of Moses. Our encounter with the psalm reminds us to praise God for no reason other than God’s own being and self-giving. Paul exhorts the established and mature members of the community to respect newcomers whose faith is still maturing. Mark reminds us that while following Jesus can create opposition even within the community of the church, Jesus’ authority ultimately prevails.

Psalm 111

This hymn begins exuberantly. The grateful psalmist announces God’s praiseworthiness and rehearses God’s mighty deeds. Moreover, the psalmist spares no mention of God’s virtuous attributes: God is “full of honor and majesty . . . gracious and merciful . . . mindful . . . powerful and giving . . . faithful and just . . . holy and awesome.”

The preacher may focus on verse 7, “The works of [God’s] hands are faithful and just; all [God’s] precepts are trustworthy.” The preacher asking how this hymn might speak again to a contemporary community of sufferers first realizes that beneath this hymn is a person’s hunger to acknowledge the “givenness of God.” Howard Thurman declares that the “givenness of God” as expressed in the hunger of the heart is prayer at its highest. The heart yearns for encounter. However, the irony about this hunger, Thurman continues, is that “the hunger itself is God, calling to God.”ⁱ

What makes us grateful? This psalm brings to mind a kesho (prayer service) in which I participated during a summer ministry internship in Machakos, Kenya. I was profoundly changed by this sacred worship. Heartfelt singing, dancing, praying, and the manifestation of glossolalia (speaking in tongues) incited an emotional frenzy. The experience was majestic. The exuberant spirit of kesho participants helped me to appreciate the renewing and spiritual power of unscripted prayer, testimony, and song. This worship practice was an offering—gifts returned to a gracious God. Despite the economic impoverishment of my Kenyan brothers and sisters and the craggy worship quarters, the hunger of the people’s hearts signified freedom, a demonstration of embodied worship. Liberty in the presence of an almighty God is what the psalmist conveys. What occurred that night in a blighted Kenyan township was, as theologian Geoffrey Wainwright says, adoration for the transcendent for no other reason than the fact that doxology is made possible because God is self-giving.ⁱⁱ



breadfortheworld
HAVE FAITH. END HUNGER.

What lessons in gratitude might this psalm teach developed nations, who have mostly unearned privileges and access to available goods and services?

The miraculous revelation for me was that in the deprived Kenyan setting, one's offering can be an act of indolence when one's petition obstructs the worship acts of prayer and praise to God. At the keshu, the people gave thanks to almighty God for being the one who is "beside none other," as the elder saints used to say in my home church. God is majestic. God provides. God gives a heritage. The psalmist makes no requests but simply speaks out of a deep hunger for God. This psalm promises wisdom and understanding as the fruit of reverence. To pray this hymn is to pray with a thankful heart for God's own sake.

ⁱ Howard Thurman, *Disciplines of the Spirit* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 87.

ⁱⁱ Geoffrey Wainwright, *Doxology: The Praise of God in Worship, Doctrine and Life; A Systematic Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 37.