

Strong Deliverer

ACTS 2:14A, 22-32 (NRSV—Peter’s Pentecost Sermon) *But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them... ²²You that are Israelites, listen to what I have to say: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you, as you yourselves know—²³this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law. ²⁴But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power. ²⁵For David says concerning him,*

*‘I saw the Lord always before me,
for he is at my right hand so that I will not be shaken;*

²⁶therefore my heart was glad, and my tongue rejoiced;

moreover my flesh will live in hope.

*²⁷For you will not abandon my soul to Hades,
or let your Holy One experience corruption.*

*²⁸You have made known to me the ways of life;
you will make me full of gladness with your presence.’*

²⁹“Fellow Israelites, I may say to you confidently of our ancestor David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. ³⁰Since he was a prophet, he knew that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would put one of his descendants on his throne. ³¹Foreseeing this, David spoke of the resurrection of the Messiah, saying,

*‘He was not abandoned to Hades,
nor did his flesh experience corruption.’*

³²This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses.

In today’s Gospel reading John tells of the disciples, cowering behind locked doors after the crucifixion; and Jesus appears in their midst. It’s the story of “Doubting Thomas;” and it ends with Jesus saying, “You believe because you have seen me. Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet have come to believe.”

All four Lectionary texts today offer a unique perspective on the delivering power of God. The old hymn, “Guide Me O Thou Great Jehovah”¹ has been my ‘ear worm’ this week. The refrain of the second stanza is a prayer:

Strong Deliverer,
Be Thou still my Strength and Shield.

In Peter’s sermon, he quotes Psalm 16, and applies it specifically to say that Jesus is the Messiah, as is demonstrated in the resurrection: God did not abandon Jesus’ soul to Hades or his body to corruption. Indeed, death could not hold him! God’s delivering power is demonstrated in delivering Jesus from death.

So, today’s texts from Acts and from Psalm 16 offer parallel messages. So do the passages from John 20 and I Peter 1, in which two themes emerge: both texts point out that resurrection creates community. The imagery of “new birth” in I Peter implies a new family, a new system of relationships typified by mutual support in the trials endured by his readers. Some say John 20 is John’s account of Pentecost—the birth of the church: Jesus “breathes on them and said to them,

¹ Lyrics by William Williams (1717-1791); Tune, “Zion” composed by Thomas Hastings (1784-1872).

'Receive the Holy Spirit.' (v22)

A second theme in both the Gospel and the epistle is that, because of the resurrection, faith is imparted without physical contact with Jesus. The Apostles walked with Jesus, ate with him, touched him; and their witness still generates faith in generations that never have seen or touched Jesus. Faith grows out of the witness of each succeeding generation.

But the common thread running through all four texts is that God is a "Strong deliverer." Maybe the clearest statement of that theme is in the opening words of Peter's sermon: he says the resurrection was inevitable, because it is yet another manifestation of the nature of God. Nowhere in the New Testament is it suggested that Jesus' resurrection was the outcome of a struggle between God and Satan—a struggle that resulted in God's victory. God acts unilaterally: "God raised Jesus because God is who God is!" And because of who God is "it was impossible for Jesus to be held in death's power" (vs. 24).

Backing up for a wider view, it is God who, through Jesus, worked the "deeds of power, wonders, and signs" (vs. 22) the people had seen. And it is God who raised Jesus from the dead. This may burst some bubbles; but Peter flatly denies that Jesus is some kind of superman who, through his own toughness, cheated death. God is the power behind what Jesus did for others (v. 22) and God is the power that delivered Jesus from death (vs. 24). That's who God is: Strong Deliverer.

But, contrast that image with the "God's gonna' gitcha'" image some people still proclaim. 35 years before the American revolution, Puritan Preacher Jonathan Edwards preached his famous "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" sermon. In it he dangled his hearers over the fires of hell and said, "You hang by a slender thread, with the flames of divine wrath flashing about it, and ready every moment to singe it, and burn it asunder..."

Now, there are passages in scripture that, taken out of context, support that approach. You can get that out of the Bible. But, it's more John Calvin than John's Gospel.

Walter Brueggemann celebrated his 87th birthday last month. In my estimation he remains America's premier non-Jewish scholar of Hebrew Scripture. He suggests the Old Testament reflects the tradition of the rabbis: testimony/counter testimony—not unlike a courtroom debate.

One testimony sees God as territorial, vengeful and blood-thirsty: a warrior calling for genocide, dashing babies' heads against rocks, disemboweling pregnant women! In this view, God demands absolute loyalty and obedience, and is brutal in punishing disloyalty and disobedience. This is legal vocabulary—the language of the courtroom—and it represents the more ancient side of the debate, probably the

residue of pagan superstitions surrounding the Israelites and influencing their earliest understandings and practices of faith.

The counter-testimony relates to Melchizedek, the mysterious figure who blessed Abram in *Genesis* 14 and to whom *Hebrews* 7 compares the risen Christ. Melchizedek is the "King of Shalem"; and it's interesting that in one rabbinic interpretation Messiah would be called "Prince of Peace (Shalem)".

This counter-testimony largely was ignored until the 8th century prophets (Isaiah, Amos, et. al.) began proclaiming a monotheistic faith: one God, universal for all nations of the earth. The vocabulary of these prophets is medical, not legal. It suggests healing, not punishment. It proclaims a God whose relationship with humanity is restorative, rather than indicting and punishing (Prosecutor/Advocate—consistent with these 8th-century prophets whose) call was for justice in place of sacrifice; mercy in place of ritual incantations.

Now there are some today who try to blend these contradictory images of God. They end up with a schizophrenic God, and a theology of salvation that depends totally on us: if we're good, God will bless us; if we're bad, "God's gonna' gitcha!" It's a theology totally devoid of grace—that unmerited, undeserved, unqualified love and acceptance of God; a theology with no Strong Deliverer.

The Bible doesn't blend those two contradictory images of God. We find one or the other, and we can trace the separate trajectory of each. One we can trace to the traditions of the elders and Scribes, steeped in law, accompanied by required liturgies and sacrifices—obligations enforced too often by corrupt priests.

The other trajectory leads to Jesus, who fulfills the counter-testimony of those later prophets and their image of a God of love and peace and restoration; a God who heals the brokenness of humanity and restores the broken relationship between God and God's creation. Jesus took sides in that debate, and in his resurrection, God says, "Yes!" to Jesus.

Does that seem different to you? It seemed different to those who heard Peter's sermon on Pentecost; and it seemed different to those who heard John's sermons (which make up the bulk of his *Gospel*). To them, the importance of resurrection was not so much about what happened to Jesus as it was about what happens to us as a result of the resurrection. Through the lens of resurrection, God no longer is seen as one who punishes us for our sins. Sin has its own consequences, and we are powerless against them (Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome and said, "The wages of sin is death.")

In today's scriptures, both Peter and John proclaim the Good News that the resurrection is God's way of taking the witness stand and testifying: "I am the one who delivers you from sin and its consequences."

Pray with me:

Open now the crystal fountain,
Whence the healing waters flow;
Let the fire and cloudy pillar
Lead me all my journey through.
Strong Deliv'rer,
Be Thou still my Strength and Shield. Amen.