

June 23, 2019

The Unselfing of America: Unself-made

John 3:3-17; Psalm 87

This morning we are continuing our summer series called: "The Unselfing of America" . Inspired by Eugene Peterson's book, *Where Your Treasure Is*, we are looking at 11 "political" themed Psalms for the purpose and hope of moving us from self and self-focused toward community and others focused.

Many of us can agree with Peterson in acknowledging the reality that there is a problem with the current state of things in America. What was true 30 years ago when Peterson wrote this book is still relevant as ever today. He says: "We have a self problem and that problem is responsible for everything else that is going wrong."

So what are we to do? How do we go about fixing the problem? How do we change? What can we do?

Peterson believes these particular 11 Psalms not only played a big role in shaping the politics of Israel but are just as relevant and important today in shaping and changing the politics of America. A change as he says, "needs to start from the inside out."

And the how in all of this is prayer! "Prayer is the source action" of all transformation.

Oswald Chambers says about prayer:

"Prayer does not equip us for greater works- prayer is the greater work."

We need to be a community committed to prayer. We need to pray personally, as children of God. And we need to be "pray politically as American citizens with daily responsibilities in caring for our nation."

I'm just going to pause there and acknowledge those of you who may have missed last week or are visiting this morning. Maybe you are thinking, "What have I just stepped into?" Did he just say the "P" word in church. And yes, yes I did. And I know how loaded and controversial that word *prayer* can be. Oh, you mean the other word...

Politics.

But don't worry. To calm any anxieties you may have, this is not a series with a political agenda pushing this political party or that political party. The only agenda is spiritual transformation as we move from self to community and hopefully a deeper engagement in prayer. Personal and political.

And maybe you are still thinking or feeling that "politics and religion don't mix". And Peterson also recognizes this reality but goes on to say:

“ All the same, God says, ‘mix them’. But be careful how you do it. The only safe way is in prayer and the psalms are our most extensive source documents showing prayer (personal and political) in action.” (*Unselfing of America*, p.9)

And so in a communal prayerful spirit let us pray as look at Psalm 87 that we read today. **Pray**

The title of the chapter is called: *Unself-Made*. This got me thinking about one of the core pillars of the American dream. That is the self-made man or woman.

The whole idea it is based on an essential doctrine that success lies within the person themselves, their efforts, their own doing, and not on outside conditions or key relationships.

The internet is a great source for “how to’s”. [WikiHow.com](http://www.wikihow.com) tells me how to become a self man man in just 4 easy steps.

1. Overcome Poverty (Oprah did it so of course anyone can do this)
2. Educate yourself
3. Start Your own business
4. Engage in politics.

And yes I love a good rags to riches story and have been inspired by individuals rising above the circumstances, overcoming adversity and the struggles of life.

I find that the idea, though with good intention and inspiration can easily fuel and contribute to the negative side of selfism and self-centeredness and that as we said is responsible for so many of the problems going on.

It even finds its way into the church. It permeates our thinking and reasoning and hinders our spiritual growth. We think, “If I just do all these things right, then God will love me more. If I work harder, then God will bless me more. If I discipline myself more...”

And really what this comes down to our identity, what defines us. What we find our value and worth in. Our jobs. Our roles in life, our accomplishments, Our self-made selves.

But what we are reminded of and what is celebrated in Psalm 87 is not what we have done, but of what God has done. In us, through us, and in this world.

It highlights and declares our God-made self and our identity with God and God’s identity with us — His people, His children. God made and establishes His people. Our identity is in being made in Him.

verse 87:1- *On the holy mount stands the city **he founded**;*

87:5- And of Zion it shall be said, "This one and that one were born in it"; for the Most High himself **will establish it.**

He founded, he established.

One of the main themes we see in Psalm 87 is this picture of birth. Peterson points out, "Psalm 87 is an exclamatory, stuttering, excited response to birth."

We see birth is announced 3 times."

v4- "This one was born there," they say.

v5-This one and that one were born in her";

v6"This one was born there."

It is one big birth announcement. Full of excitement, emotion, awe and wonder where words just seem to fall short.

Peterson describes it well in saying this psalm is "More like an honest, awkwardly spontaneous prayer in the presence of an excess of meaning, a surplus of reality." (too much to take it)

That is the thing about the miracle and marvel of birth it is overwhelming and marvelous (not what I was thinking in middle school when they showed the Miracle of Birth film).

But I remember at each of our daughters birth just the excitement, anxiety, feelings you didn't even know you had. I was so overwhelmed I essentially passed out at 2 out of the 4 births. May have been that "surplus of reality."

I love what Peterson says here:

*"In the presence of birth we are at the source of life. The most ordinary birth is far more than we can achieve by our best efforts and highly sophisticated technology. Here is a mystery, but a mystery of light not darkness, full of goodness, brimming with blessing. Every birth powerfully recalls us to this source: **we have our origins in someone other than ourselves, and greater than ourselves.**"*

And that other and greater thing is God. And the birth this Psalm is talking about is no ordinary birth. But it talking about salvation. Being born again. Born as beloved Sons and Daughters of God.

Something that only the love and grace of God can give birth to. Birth into the family of God made possible only by Christ, in Christ and His church. There is no room here for any self-made idealism.

Psalm 100 reminds us:

Know that the Lord is God. It is he that made us, and we are his. we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.

And Ephesians 2:8-9: For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— 9 not the result of works, so that no one may boast. 10 For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

Here In Psalm 87 we see not 1 not 2 but 5 births named here:

*Among those who know me I mention Rahab (Egypt) and Babylon;
Philistia too, and Tyre, with Ethiopia
“This one was born there,” they say.(v4)*

It is easy for us to just read or glance over this because of the ancient name references. But these names are names of nations and people. But not just any nations. They were the enemies of God and God's people

Peterson raises the very question we should be asking:

“How did these five ancient enemies get to be included in a prayerful reflection on the marvels and mysteries of birth? How did God's enemies become His people?

He says: “There is only one satisfactory answer, They got there by being born again.”(*Where Your Treasure is, p. 23*)

Again this is the miracle and marvel of birth. People from all over, different nations, races, cultural, even enemies being born into the family of God. Something only God can give birth to.

God redeemed and used the scattering of the Hebrew people that came from persecution and exile to be the light and bring the salvation of God to the surrounding world at that time.

As these foreign nations and even enemies watched and observed the Hebrews they were drawn in. And what drew them in was God at work and the authenticity of faith. A living loving God and a passionate people.

Peterson writes:

“They left their dull preoccupations with the self. They discovered, through the witness of the Jew, the reality of God who created, who entered into suffering, who carved out a way of redemption. They believed!” (*Where Your Treasure is, p. 24*) They were born again!

It is not difficult to imagine that Jesus had in mind Psalm 87 when he said to Nicodemus, “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again” (John 3:3). Without a doubt Nicodemus, as a God fearing Jew, understood himself to be a solid citizen of the kingdom of God

He was probably confused and surprised when Jesus says to him, 'You must be born again'" (John 3:5-7). It must have been shocking to Nicodemus to realize that he had to "born of the Spirit" and he was in the same boat and same group as those Gentiles(even enemies) that were born again.

But this is no surprise to us, as right after Nicodemus' encounter with Jesus we are given a clear picture of God's desire and heart for the world.

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. (John 3:16-17)

Psalm 87 places all this birth or rebirth that God is bringing about in Zion.

But what and where is Zion? And what is so special about this place?

We could do a whole sermon series on Zion but I am going to give you the short version.

Zion is Jerusalem. It is the city of God. Back in Genesis God chose a people, Israel, to be His people . To be a light and carry out His redemptive plan for the world. God not only chose a people but He also chose a place. Zion (Jerusalem) to be His dwelling place.

But here in this Psalm we find Zion is not just a symbol of the past or an outdated place but it is the place ,the spiritual reality of "born-again" Christians and the place of citizenship in the kingdom, in the family of God.

And here is the kicker we need to be reminded of... there was nothing extraordinary about Israel itself that merited this blessing and privilege. Israel was not a self-made people. Zion was not a self-made place.

But God made it, God gave birth to His people. God chose Israel not because of anything special about them, but because He had determined to love them specially.

The Lord did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the Lord loved you. (Deuteronomy 7:7-8)

The physical Zion or Jerusalem itself is nothing special or unique. The place itself is not holy. But God makes it holy. His presence is what sets it apart as holy. It is God that makes it extraordinary!

As followers of Jesus there is nothing that we did. Nothing holy about us. It was all God and God at work in us!

Zion is the place from which salvation comes. And Hebrews 12 paints a beautiful picture of the Zion God is building and drawing people into through being born-again.

22 But you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, 23 to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the Judge of all, to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, 24 to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

And also Rev 21

2 I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.**3** And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. **4** 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death' or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."**5** He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" Then he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true."

This is not all just some future hope and far off dream but is a present reality that is fulfilled in Christ and His church.

Jesus is God with us, God made flesh. Jesus laid down His life and rose again from the dead that we might be rescued, redeemed, and saved from our sins. No longer enemies. No longer dead in our sins. But alive in Him. In Christ we enter into the family and the city of God . We are brought near to God. In Him, we are made citizens of God's city—a heavenly Jerusalem.

And as the Psalm declares: *Glorious things are spoken of you, O city of God.*

Think about and consider what is being said. It is actually quite humbling. That is God has determined to make His people a praise. What makes up the city of God are the people of God.

God has made us to be vessels and witnesses of His mercy and grace. He has put us on display before a watching world that we would be a witness to His power. Power to change lives. Power to bring light to darkness. Power to make all things new.

As God's people we are reflection of His glory

We need to ask ourselves... Do we live in such a way that witness to this? Do we reflect God's glory? We can't do it if we are consumed with self. If we privatize and separate our spiritual life from our daily lives.

Peterson says:

“The city of God of which “glorious things are spoken” is not, of course, just the Jerusalem that rival politicians argue over and journalists report on, but neither is it dematerialized.

It is the city as God is working his purposes in it and as God’s glory radiates from it, but an actual city all the same, a city of church and culture, of worship and weather.

“Spiritual birth lands us in a physical city and in the public places.

The Lord loves the gates of Zion more than all the dwellings of Jacob.

That is not to say God does not love the households and families that follow Jesus but it is the gates that God loves more.

It is the gate that represents the public places. The place of action. The gates that allow access to God and His presence.

Peterson points out:

The newborn of Psalm 87 do not run away from the city to pursue God in private, they stream into it where they become participants in its government. AS an act of prayer, the personal (one’s birth) is combined with the public (the city).

Praying through this Psalm is sure to remind us there is no such thing as a rogue Christian. There is no following Jesus and being His disciple apart from belonging to His people and walking with His people. There is no loving God without loving His people, His church.

And so we need to keep praying. Pray without ceasing. Pray personally and politically. Pray for loved ones who are in need of the truth of the gospel. Keep praying for the unreached peoples. Keep investing in the mission of reaching the outsiders. The Babylonians, Phillistines, and so on. We need to step out and keep proclaiming the gospel to our friends and family and fellow workers and students and neighbors.

But also, we need to keep praying for and loving all those who are in Zion. Who are in the city of God. We need to step out of your self-made mindsets and out of our demographic comfort zone. Embrace the gospel of adoption. Take action. Live it out.

And if that sounds like a lot of work it’s because it is. And on our own, by ourselves we can’t. But in and through Christ we can. We are God-Made! And as Psalm 87 reminds us His springs, His strength, His energy is in us.

I love the picture Peterson paints and leaves for us here at the end of this Psalm:

In You- the place of worship, the place of preaching, the place of prayer, the place of politics. The place that God established for revelation and rule. The place that affirms the invisible in our visibilities, the time and place set apart to attend to what is going on around us, beneath us, and now in us.