

July 7, 2019

“The Unselfing of America: Unself Government”

Psalm 93, John 18:28-37

Eugene Peterson was a humble, soft-spoken, brilliant Old Testament Ph.D student who discovered, inadvertently, that being a pastor was his true calling. So, in 1963, he started and pastored a little church in Bel Air, Maryland for 29 years before he stepped down to focus on his translation of the Bible we know as The Message. He also wrote a bunch of books along the way. One of his earlier works is called *Where Your Treasure Is: Psalms That Summon You From Self to Community*, and in it he invites us to look at 11 of the Hebrew Psalms which have a nationalistic focus. He feels these particular Psalms are a great resource for helping us to live life with God at the center as King, instead of living with ourselves in the center – and making a mess of everything. Over 30 years ago, he said, “I have written a book for Christians who want to do something about what is wrong with America and want to plunge into the center, not tinker at the edge. I have chosen eleven psalms that shaped the politics of Israel and can shape the politics of America, and I have taken them seriously . . . I have written to encourage Christians to pray [these psalms] both as children of God with eternal destinies and as American citizens with daily responsibilities in caring for our nation.” We’re using the title of his first chapter The Unselfing of America for the entire sermon series. All of the “selves” we live into must be undone. Self-made, self-centered . . . Psalm 93 introduces us, not to self-government but to Unself-Government.

At the beginning of his chapter on this Psalm, Peterson gives us a glimpse at the picture of America he had while growing up in the Church. It’s quite common for many American Christians and goes something like this: the people of the American colonies were a sort of slave to England, just like the Hebrews were to Pharaoh; breaking free from England was akin to the Exodus. Therefore, our form of government is the way God desires life to be in the new Promised Land. Peterson isn’t belittling this grand experiment we call democracy. Nobody I know really has a problem with self-government. Even critics, when they complain about our government (which is ALL of us from time to time) are quibbling about the implementation and execution of it, not the concept of government “of the people, by the people, and for the people.” Even the most outspoken against our political system aren’t exactly moving to other countries. Early in the chapter, Peterson declares, “Self-government is the apex of political science.” (p.52) Would you agree? It’s better than kings and dictators and cabals. But that doesn’t mean self-government is the apex of discipleship, does it? We are still primarily citizens of God’s Kingdom, aren’t we? So how do we live as citizens of the One True King while participating and contributing to our own communities and nation in transformative ways?

Peterson asks a Big Question early in the chapter (and you might not like it): “How much does our American pride in self-government unconsciously subvert our Christian commitment to God’s sovereignty?” (p.53)

Before answering that question too quickly, Peterson suggests we need to regularly pray this Psalm – and some of the other Psalms mentioned on page 53 – in thoughtful and reflective ways. He knows it’s inevitable that those of us who practice self-government will get a little fuzzy about what it means to live under God’s sovereignty . . . unless we have reminders in our praying. This Psalm begins with **“The Lord is King!”** (Psalm 93:1) These were called kingship psalms and were used on New Year’s Day in a festival of worship to celebrate and declare God’s sovereign rule. And with God as King, there was no room for others to take the mantle of leadership – of any kind – unless they acknowledged Yahweh’s ultimate rule. Even Israel’s king was subject to the authority of the One True King.

The psalm continues: **“Your throne is established from of old”** . . . And by “old” the people meant eternally. **“You are from everlasting.”** (Psalm 93:2) As you probably know, Israel did have kings. A LOT of kings. A lot of BAD kings. And in all that time, even in periods of rebellion and exile, they never sat down to drum up a philosophy of self-rule. They were never into the latest and greatest political idea or party platform, and they certainly didn’t care about what the pollsters declared as the new political climate of the people.

Did Israelite leaders have to make decisions? Yes. Did they have to respond to enemies, famines and moral failure? Absolutely. Did they have to consider the larger community and how to best live together? You bet. [Remember, that’s what Peterson means by politics: how we choose navigating life together.] But in all of this leading and decision-making, they never thought they were doing this apart from the rule of God and the laws He had given them long ago. They were truly a nation “under God,” not because they said it in their pledge at the beginning of a school day, but because praying this psalm and others like it kept their minds saturated in the rule and reign of Yahweh. This meant that when challenges and tragedies struck they, first and foremost, looked to God – in their scriptures and during times of prayer. And more than most, the Israelites knew challenge and tragedy.

Which is why they had no problem praying, **“The floods have lifted up.”** (Psalm 93:3) This prayer they sang and prayed mentions “floods” **three times**. And when floods arise, leadership is needed. People have to be defended. Crops have to be rationed. The government has to do something. On page 58 Peterson reminds us what we all know to be true. “All government is, in one way or another, a response to the floods.” No floods; no government needed. In America, the government’s response to “floods” of various kinds is almost never good enough to satisfy everyone. Can you think of the last time that we, as an entire nation, applauded our leaders in their attempt to deal with “floods.” We expect our leaders to rescue us from the emergencies that pummel our coasts and strike at our schools. We expect an elected official to throw us a life jacket to keep us from drowning. But Israel never looked to their leaders for rescue.

Instead they looked to God. Why? Because **“MORE majestic than the thunders of mighty waters . . . majestic on high is the Lord.”** (Psalm 93:4) **God’s Might is declared how many times? Three.** In this psalm, the three floods are answered – not with a government solution – but with the mighty power of God. Flood. Flood. Flood. Mightier, mightier, mightier is God above the roaring waters and waves. It is not a sign of faith to deny the reality of evil and difficulty and act like they don’t exist; nor is it a sign of faith to become anxious and undone by the “floods.” Neither denial or despair is an appropriate response for citizens who profess allegiance to Christ.

So what do we do instead? We turn to God in prayer, not to inform Him of what’s gone wrong, but to keep in the forefront of our minds that He is sovereign and more powerful than anything or anyone else. The end of Psalm 93 reminds us that God’s majesty and power isn’t a brute strength; instead, His power is found in what He has declared. **“Your decrees are very sure . . . forevermore.”** (Psalm 93:5)

What God has declared is non-negotiable Truth. He is not asking for a simple or super majority to ratify what He has decided and declared. He doesn’t need marketers to help Him spin His plan. Nor does He hire lobbyists to help Him get His way. His ways are holy. His Truth is ultimate. And His life is truly life.

1,000 years after David wrote this Psalm, the One who defined Himself as the Way, Truth, and Life stood before both the religious governing body (Caiaphas) and the secular governing body (Pilate). He does not back down nor is He bothered by the flood waters rising around Him. “My kingdom is not from this world . . . For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth [the decrees of My Father]. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to My voice.” (John 18:36, 37) Period. I’m the Son of the King!

The night before He stood before the powers of the Church and Rome, Jesus prayed for His sovereign Father to establish a new plan and establish a new policy. Jesus wanted a way out of

crucifixion. And it isn't wrong to ask God to rescue us from danger and suffering. But did you notice Jesus didn't demand His own way? "Give me 30 more days to pull of my agenda." "How about if these 12 guys become cabinet members in my party and you give us three years to turn things around?" After pleading three times for the "floods" to go away (Did you notice how many times He asked God to come up with another way? Three times.), Jesus settled it in His mind: "No matter what, You're in charge. What You have decreed is sure and certain."

Those who claim to follow Jesus and to be aligned with His Kingdom must ultimately come to the same conclusion. Peterson writes, "Slowly but surely, not culture, not family, not government, not job, not even the tyrannous self can stand against the quiet power and creative influence of God's sovereignty. Every natural tie of family and race, every willed commitment to person and nation is finally subordinated to the rule of God." (*Where Your Treasure Is*, p.66)

Just to add one more twist to the sovereign rule and reign of God . . . the way He goes about establishing His Kingdom doesn't always look like a victory; the way we define it. A win for God looked like a loss. A cross isn't the way to get more votes. Nor is death the way to get the masses to sign on as faithful followers. What Jesus did is so counter-cultural. It's so unbelievable. And it's something we so often forget. So we need to keep coming to this table. We need to keep rehearsing and remembering Who is in charge . . . Who the final authority is . . . Who wins.