

September 1, 2019

“The Unselfing of America: Unself-Sufficient

Psalm 114, 1 Corinthians 10:1-4

I’ve tried to tell you a little about Eugene Peterson each week during our summer sermon series; partly so you know most of these thoughts aren’t my own, partly to help you connect more deeply with him (and want to read more of his books), and partly to honor him – making it clear how grateful I am for his words to the Church . . . and to me. One thing about him I haven’t mentioned is his love for wilderness. He grew up near Kalispell, Montana and, even though he studied, pastored, wrote, and taught for more than 40 years in the East, he always returned during the summer to rugged and beautiful Western Montana. If you read the chapter, you clearly saw his love for God’s creation, his insistence that we never turn nature into an idol, and his frustration with so many Christians who have disconnected from their responsibility to be good stewards of the earth. He spent more than a page or two identifying the many ways our Self-Centeredness has left our world in tatters. This is yet another reason why (in 1985) he called for The Unselfing of America. And, remember, his invitation is to get Unselfed by praying these eleven nationalistic Psalms along with the Israelites of long ago. He uses Psalm 114 as a means of helping us become Unself-Sufficient.

### [Scripture and Prayer]

“I’ve got this!” “You’ve got this!” We say it to our kids when they attempt to take their first steps, ride a bike, take an exam, give a recital, climb a mountain, or enter the work world. “You’ve got this!” We say it to our friends, teammates, siblings, co-workers. We pump each other up with reminders that it can be done. We say it to ourselves as we walk into the interview, try something daring, attempt to overcome a bad habit and practice more self-control. “I’ve got this!” Maybe we even give ourselves a little pep talk when it comes to our faith in Christ.

On the one hand, there’s nothing wrong with a little encouragement and motivation. Positive self-talk has its place. On the other hand, **Self-sufficiency is an illusion**. We work toward self-sufficiency, and even claim ‘we’ve got it’, but it’s just not true. Pick any area of life and you’ll soon discover “You don’t have this!” Physically, relationally, spiritually, economically, in our community, nationally. At some point, it dawns on us that our Self is INSufficient for the things that really matter. This is especially true when it comes to forgiveness and redemption.

The nation of Israel rehearsed this reality over and over in their prayers. They knew they were NOT self-sufficient. They knew that “Judah became God’s sanctuary, and Israel His dominion (kingdom)” (Psalm 114:2) because of the wonder-working power of Yahweh. It was God who made a way for them through the waters; it was God who stopped up the Jordan River. It was God who produced water from a rock. They could never have done it on their own. Joining them in praying their prayers, we get the clear reminder that neither can we.

I don't know what your Red Sea and Jordan River moments are or have been . . . those impossible moments when someone may have said "You've got this!" but you knew you didn't. You knew there was no way out, until God made a way where there was no way. I've seen waters part. Have you? Do you need to see them part right now?

Marriages on the rocks; depression that won't go away; a wound that went deep from a friend or co-worker; the feeling that God was absent; an insufficient margin of financial resources; the presence of cancer; a family dysfunction; an unending addiction.

Psalm 114 reminds us that it is God who "makes a way." In the case of the Israelites He made a way through the natural world. Peterson says, "It [Psalm 114] deals with the way God is acting with nature as His accomplice. There is nothing here about how we can manipulate nature in order to shape history to our convenience. The earth is not here for us to use; the earth is the scene of God's actions." (*Where Your Treasure Is*, p.153)

One thing I love about hiking in the Rockies is the sheer magnitude of it all, and the reminder of how vast God is. Those mountains are so big. This past Tuesday they looked TOO big, and reminded me I can't manage what God created. I can only enter into it and enjoy it as a gift. I'd like to manage it and miraculously make the trails to the top of a 14er less steep. I'd like to dot the landscape with wild animals at just the right time to distract me from the pain in my legs. And then, when God gives me the gift of 5 fluffy white mountain goats while we're climbing up the face of god-awful Mt. Belford, I'd like to direct them closer to the trail instead of watch them go in the other direction. "Come over here, goats, I need a little pick me up." What I'd also like to do is make it possible to go on to Mt. Oxford and then back to the car instead of having to go back up Mt. Belford and get to the car after 12 ½ hours of hiking. I'd like to do all this and not feel sore, or slow. I feel so Unself-Sufficient when I'm out and about in the mountains. And that might not be all bad for me.

But this Psalm is about God and His redemption, not nature and its beauty. It is about redemption not eco-systems and rivers and mountain goats. And when it comes to redemption, the bad news is that all of our collective obedience and faithfulness and good deeds are INSUFFICIENT. And the sooner we wrap our heads and hearts and guts around this bad news the better. Because then – instead of working so hard to "make a way where there is no way" and be so Self-Sufficient – we can cry out to and acknowledge the One who has made a way, is making a way, and will make a way. Then, we can stand or kneel before the God who redeems us and "Tremble." (Psalm 114:7)

And in our trembling, we can pray. Peterson reminds us (and this may be one of his main themes of ministry throughout his life and why he worked so hard to give us The Message translation) that **our praying can be imaginative and full of metaphor**. Prayer doesn't have to be precise. It can be playful. Mountains don't really skip like rams and lambs, and seas don't flee. As we pray and sing God's redemption, our language should come alive with metaphor like it does in Psalm 114 and throughout the Psalter. And there are no better metaphors than the ones

from the natural world. Peterson says, “God’s action and presence among us is so beyond our comprehension that sober description and accurate definition are no longer functional. The levels of reality here are so beyond us that they invite extravagance of language. But the language, though extravagant, is not exaggerated.” (*Where Your Treasure Is*, p.156) The Hebrew language of the Israelites wasn’t scientific by any means, but it was truthful and it was reverent and it was humbly directed to the God who was present with them.

Psalm 114 reminds us that in God’s presence we will “Tremble” (Psalm 114:7) because of what He has done. Peterson helps redeem this word (**tremble**, which sort of goes with words like fear) that has kept so many at arms-length from God (or even further). He says, “Trembling is not, as outsiders so often think, being scared in the presence of God. It is something more like a holy playfulness, like faith frolicking.” (*Where Your Treasure Is*, p.159) And the reason we can get playful and imaginative in celebrating God’s ongoing redemption in our lives, in our communities, and in our world, is because He keeps blowing past all our attempts to manage and be self-sufficient. Peterson says, “In the presence of the God of Jacob there is life that is beyond prediction.” (*Where Your Treasure Is*, p.160)

To be honest, I loved this chapter but struggled to see how he was connecting it all to Self-Sufficiency. And then I came to the last few paragraphs. “We do not begin life on our own. We do not finish it on our own. Life, especially when we experience by faith the complex interplay of creation and salvation, is not fashioned out of our own genetic lumber and cultural warehouses. [Life] is not hammered together with the planks and nails of our thoughts and dreams, our feelings and fancies. **We are not self-sufficient.** We enter a world that is created by God, that already has a rich history and is crowded with committed participants – a world of animals and mountains, of politics and religion; a world where people build houses and raise children, where volcanoes erupt lava and rivers flow to the sea; a world in which, however carefully we observe and watch and study it, surprising things keep on taking place (like rocks turning into pools of water).” I love his next line. “We keep on being surprised because we are in on something beyond our management, something over our heads.” (*Where Your Treasure Is*, p.161)

Aren’t you glad you live in a world where you are in over your head? Can you imagine how small life would need to be for us to actually manage it? I know you’d like to wake up in the morning feeling Self-Sufficient. So would I. But then we’d have to live in that world – one that was mundane, predictable, and automated. No surprises. No jaw-dropping wonder. No need for redemption and transformation. No need to be in relationship with the only One who can and is making all things new . . . the only All-Sufficient One . . . who is never in over His head.

It is this All-Sufficient One we now celebrate as we come to this table, for this meal. It’s a table for all who are in Christ and those who, even now in this moment, would admit their insufficiency and invite His All-Sufficiency to bring forgiveness and redemption.

Tom Hansen – First Presbyterian Church of Grand Junction, CO

Whether we are and have been “in Christ” for a long time or received His grace more recently – or are ready to receive the gift of grace now – we all eat this meal together as equals: co-heirs with Christ, brothers and sisters by faith, beloved sons and daughters of the Most High God. As Paul wrote in his letter to the Corinthians, we “all [eat] the same spiritual food, and all [drink] the same spiritual drink. For [we drink] from the spiritual rock that [follows us], and the rock [is] Christ. (1 Corinthians 10:3-4)