

Psalm 68

22nd Sunday Year C
Office of Readings Tuesday Week 3

This is a hymn of victory in the style of Exodus 15. The Exodus event explains many elements of the hymn and its development: the presence of God in Sinai, the departure, the advance through the wilderness, the rebellion of some who died in the desert (Numbers 14), the resistance by some kings (eg Moab and Bashan, Numbers 21). At the end of the journey they found a cultivated and irrigated land (Deuteronomy 11), which was divided up (Joshua 13-21), and in which the people settled. Psalm 68 takes this up to the building of the temple as God's dwelling in the Holy Land (see Chronicles). It is modelled also on the victory song of Deborah (Judges 5)

YHWH, when you went out from Seir, when you marched from the region of Edom, the earth trembled, and the heavens poured, the clouds indeed poured water. The mountains quaked before YHWH of Sinai, before YHWH, the God of Israel.

– Judges 5:4-5

The title reads: 'To the leader. Of David. A Psalm*. A Song.'

Part One anticipates themes and introduces the main characters

The psalmist is praying that God will rise up as a warrior-judge.

Whenever the ark set out, Moses would say, 'Arise, YHWH, let your enemies be scattered, and your foes flee before you.' And whenever it came to rest, he would say, 'Return, YHWH of the ten thousand thousands of Israel.'

– Numbers 10:35-36

The people celebrate God's victory.

YHWH will roar from on high, and from his holy habitation utter his voice.

– Jeremiah 25:30

¹Let God rise up, let his enemies be scattered; let those who hate him flee before him. ²As smoke disappears, so let them disappear; as wax melts before the fire, let the wicked perish before God.

³But let the just* be joyful; let them exult before God; let them be jubilant with joy. ⁴Sing to God, make music in his honour; lay down a road for him who gallops over the plain – his name is YH – be exultant before him.

I delivered the poor who cried, and the orphan who had no helper. The blessing of the wretched came upon me, and I caused the widow's heart to sing for joy.

– Job 29:12-13

⁵Father of orphans and protector of widows is God in his holy habitation.

YHWH, a warrior-king

6God gives the desolate a home to live in; he leads out the prisoners to prosperity, but the rebellious live in a parched land.

We reflect on Jesus' healing of the leper (Mark 1:40-45), and the deranged man on the eastern side of the lake (Mark 5:1-20).

Part Two

Theophanies in the desert anticipate nurturing rain in the promised land.

**7O God, when you went out at the head of your people,
when you marched through the wilderness,**

[Selah*]

**8the earth quaked, the heavens poured down rain
at the presence of God, the God of Sinai,
at the presence of God, the God of Israel.**

**9Rain in abundance, O God, you showered abroad;
you restored your heritage when it languished.**

**10Your flock found a dwelling in it;
in your goodness, O God, you provided for the needy.**

Part Three

God as a victorious general distributes the spoils of war

11The Lord sounds the war cry.

'The Lord' here translates the Hebrew ^aדֹנָי [דָּוָןָי], which, in late Judaism, was the word pronounced when YHWH occurred in the written text (see also verses 19, 20, 22 and 32).

Great is the company of those who bear the tidings:

12Kings, armies, they flee, they flee!

Houses and farms are divided as spoil –

13and you stay among the sheepfolds!

The psalmist is summoning everyone to come and join in the victory celebrations!

**– the wings of a dove covered with silver,
its pinions with green gold.**

Are these the military standards of the Israelite army?

14When the Almighty scattered kings, snow fell on Zalmon.

'Zalmon' means 'black mountain'. Judges 9:48 indicates that it is the name of a mountain in the vicinity of Shechem. However, in this psalm it seems to indicate a mountain of Bashan, in the high country north-east of the lake of Galilee.

Part Four

In the past God led us to victory. In the present God will continue to save us!

**¹⁵O mighty mountain, mountain of Bashan;
O many-peaked mountain, mountain of Bashan!**

Bashan is the fertile area of upper Transjordan east of the Sea of Galilee and mainly north of the Yarmuk river.

**¹⁶Why do you look with envy, O many-peaked mountain,
at the mountain that God selected for his abode?
YHWH will reside there forever.**

**¹⁷The chariots of the Lord by the thousand,
tens of thousands of archers.**

The Lord came from Sinai into the holy place.

**¹⁸You ascended the high mount, leading captives in your train,
receiving peoples, rebels, as tribute;**

Paul adapts verse eighteen and applies it to the exalted Jesus ascending into heaven and pouring out the gift of God's Holy Spirit: 'When he ascended on high he made captivity itself a captive; he gave gifts to his people' (Ephesians 4:8). Instead of a procession of conquered kings bringing people as tribute to YHWH, Paul presents Jesus as the one who has conquered death and is *giving* gifts to his people.

and you took up your position there, O YH God.

**¹⁹Blessed* be the Lord, who daily bears us up;
God takes charge of our salvation*. [Selah*]**

²⁰God is for us, our Saviour* God.

It is up to YHWH the Lord to liberate from death.

**²¹God will shatter the heads of his enemies,
the hairy crown of those who walk in their sinful* ways.**

**²²The Lord said, 'I will bring them back from Bashan,
I will bring them back from the depths of the sea,**

**²³so that you may bathe your feet in blood,
so that the tongues of your dogs may have their share of the foe.'**

Some interpret this as a threat that God will bring back their enemies so that the slaughter of his people will be repeated. Amos carries a similar threat:

Though they dig into Sheol, from there shall my hand take them;
though they climb up to heaven, from there I will bring them down.
Though they hide themselves on the top of Carmel,
from there I will search out and take them;
and though they hide from my sight at the bottom of the sea,
there I will command the sea-serpent, and it shall bite them.

– Amos 9:2-3

In context it seems rather to be a promise that God will bring back his dispersed people to enjoy the spoils.

Part Five

A solemn liturgical procession celebrating victory

²⁴Your cortège makes its appearance, O God,
the solemn procession of my God, my King, into the sanctuary –

²⁵the singers in front, the musicians last,
between them girls playing tambourines.

²⁶Bless* God in the great congregation,
the Lord in the assembly of Israel.

²⁷There is Benjamin, the least of them, in the lead,
the princes of Judah in great numbers
the princes of Zebulun, the princes of Naphtali.

Part Six

A prayer that God will continue to defeat the wicked.

²⁸Command, O God, according to your authority;
show your strength, O God, as you have done for us before,

²⁹from your temple in Jerusalem.

Kings bear tribute to you.

³⁰Rebuke the wild animals that live among the reeds,
the herd of bulls, the calves of the peoples.

They fall prostrate before you with bars of gold.

Scatter the peoples who delight in war.

³¹Let bronze be brought from Egypt;
let Cush [Nubia] hasten to stretch out its hands to God.

³²Sing to God, O kingdoms of the earth;
sing praises to the Lord,

³³who rides through the heavens, the ancient heavens,
causing his mighty voice to thunder.

³⁴Acknowledge God's power.

His majesty is over Israel;

his authority is above the clouds.

³⁵Awesome is God in his sanctuary, the God of Israel;
he gives power and strength to his people.

Blessed* be God!