

Reflection: A Sacrifice of Thanksgiving

New North Church, Hingham

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Based on **Psalm 50**

After Larry Bird retired as a player in 1992, a reporter asked Red Auerbach if he thought Larry would come back to coach the Celtics. Red was shocked, saying, “Good God Almighty, why would he want to do that?” Which was a good question, and Red emphasized his amazement by including one of our favorite names for God right up front: in Hebrew, *El Shaddai*.¹

In the first verse in our reading, the psalmist used three different names for the one who ‘speaks and summons the earth’ and whose authority reaches from one horizon to the other: El, Elohim, YHWH. These names range from the most ancient name for God – El, the Mighty One – and the newest – YHWH, the name God revealed to Moses at the burning bush. Elohim is El-plural and is the usual name used for God when you want to just refer to God as God. Using all three together gathered in every tradition and let people know exactly who the psalmist meant.

This psalm is not a hymn or a prayer or a song, but something like a legal proceeding. Walter Brueggemann called it ‘a decree with no room for negotiation.’²

The psalm has three parts and only God the judge speaks. In fact, God is more than judge here – God also acts as the prosecuting attorney.

The first part is a summons. God calls on the heavens and the earth to serve as witnesses, and then gathers the faithful with whom God made a covenant.

In the second part, God corrects the way the people sacrifice and worship, and here is where it gets interesting.

God says to the people, *hear* and *obey* – the Hebrew word has a double meaning. God will speak and testify against them using more court language. For some reason, somehow, some way, the people have failed God.

The problem is not the sacrifices per se; God said burnt offerings are okay. The problem is a misunderstanding or misuse of sacrifice.

God said a sacrifice brought from ‘your house’ or from ‘your folds’ will be rejected – and we wouldn’t even know it. As God is the Creator and all that is in the world is God’s, such a sacrifice denies this fact, because all it represents is a transference of God’s property back to God.³

In the same way, we deny God’s sovereignty if we bring a sacrifice that *we* think God needs. God doesn’t need our stuff especially as it comes from God.

The problem described in this part of the psalm is that this kind of worship thinks of God as a worshiper like us and that just isn’t so.

Instead, God said worship should consist of two things. First, offer a sacrifice of thankful praise. In Hebrew, it’s called a *todah*, a sacrifice of gratitude or acknowledgement. God wants to know that we are sincerely thankful for what God has given us.

Secondly, God expects to hear our prayers in times of trouble. Prayer and thanksgiving honor God. One midrash says, “A thank-offering is dearer to God than all other offerings, for these are brought only because of transgressions.”⁴ In other words, this kind of sacrifice means something to both God and the one making the offering.

(Other psalms speak of similar interpretations of sacrifice.)⁵

The third part of the psalm describes what happens when we think of God as being someone like us, and it minimizes God. The reality, then and now, is that we depend on God, but God does not depend on us in any way.

The wicked, by the way, are not a separate group from the faithful, but are part of God’s people, sort of like a field full of weeds and wheat.

What’s different about this psalm is that even though it threatens punishment, it offers another way. Replace misunderstanding with understanding. Take the right way. If we hear and obey, God will save.

In a right relationship with God, we are not equals, but God is always ready to give salvation. God, through the psalmist, describes two ways we can choose to go. There’s the way of faith where we call, and God saves. It’s the way where we let God be God and we live a life of thanksgiving and salvation.

Then there is the way in which God will not participate, the way that makes empty offerings to God which God will reject. Neither burnt offerings nor incense nor any other thing that we do impresses God.

Our worship can never perfectly reflect God's sovereignty and grace. It can only acknowledge God as Creator and sustainer. It can only do its best to live by the Word and to offer God our continual thanks and praise; to remember all that God has done for us; and to call on God through prayer and to trust that God will deliver.

God is not quiet or hidden or far away. God is with us, and Christians are joined to God's people by a covenant made through Jesus' sacrifice on the Cross (Mark 14:24).

At the Communion table, Jesus calls on us to remember him. We are also called to remember the wholeness and fellowship we experience when we share a meal together. And he calls on us to do in the world what we do at Christ's table – at all our tables, when we offer a thanksgiving to God.

Amen.

¹ The All-Sufficient One; see Genesis 17:1-2.

² Brueggemann, Walter. *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary*, Augsburg Publishing House, Minneapolis, 1984, pp. 89–91.

³ Mays, James L. *Psalms*, John Knox Press, Louisville, 1994, pp.194-196.

⁴ Midrash Tehillim, I/470.

⁵ Psalm 40:6-8; psalm 51:16-19.