

Proper 4, Year A
Psalm 46
June 1, 2008

Trinity Episcopal Church
Sonoma, CA

There is a River:
A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Susan Allison-Hatch

“There is a river whose streams make glad the Holy City—the City of God.”

Gladness. It’s an old word. An odd word. A word you don’t hear much any more. A word that comes from a different time and a different place.

Some folks still use that word. “I’ll be glad to” or “Glad to see you.” But I bet when you’re sorting through the thesaurus in your mind, “glad” is not the first word you grab when looking for a word that encapsulates a sense of gratitude and well-being and fullness and completeness and hopefulness. “Glad”—a four-letter word pregnant with meaning. Yet not a word we often use.

Jonah was glad when the Lord gave him shade.
The children of Israel—captives in a foreign land—were glad at the promise of the Lord.
The people of Zion were glad when rain came in due season.

The psalmists tell us the righteous are glad; the humble are glad; those who receive God’s mercy are glad. Some psalmists sing of being glad in their work; others of being glad in their meditation.

Isaiah talks about the gladness that will come to the ransomed of the Lord living in captivity in Babylon as they see their sorrow and sighing fleeing before them. Proverbs speaks of gladness as the hope of the righteous.

The early disciples, sharing what they had in common, broke bread with gladness and singleness of heart. Paul urges the church at Phillipi to receive the Lord with gladness. We pray every Sunday that we may serve the Lord “with gladness and singleness of heart.”

Gladness. There’s an element of confidence to it—confidence that God will provide—shade, a safe return, rain in due season. Confidence that God will provide what we need when we need it.

Gladness. It’s borne out of patience, out of a sense that we live in a time beyond our own—that this moment is not every moment, that God has a way of making all things new.

Gladness. It seems to come when people walk in the ways of God, and when people remember that God is with them always—even to the end of the age.

Gladness. It's borne out of gratitude—gratitude that God, our Beloved, is with us in the midst of our pain and the depth of our sorrow, shining a light into our fearful hearts.

Gladness. It arises out of the certainty that the Voice of the Almighty will break through hearts of stone and will refine hearts of steel one day transforming even those who oppress the weak.

How I wish that I could live in gladness! But I keep getting stuck. I find myself focusing on what isn't going right. I want it all—now. I get frustrated. I get impatient. I get indignant. And I miss the point.

The point the psalmist makes.

Remember God's words. The words the psalmist recalls.

“Awaken. Befriend justice and mercy;
Do you not know you bear my Love?
Who among you will respond?”

Gladness doesn't come when we get what we want; gladness comes when we befriend justice and mercy. Gladness comes when we make justice and mercy a part of our daily lives. When we can no longer turn our heads away from injustice; when we lose sleep over children going to bed hungry, over prisoners demeaned and diminished, over rights long denied, we have taken steps to make justice our friend. But that is not enough. Gladness comes when we respond to God's self-giving love by bearing God's love to one another; by seeing one another as children of a loving God; by giving one another the break God gives us.

But all that's just a drop in the water of the stream that makes glad the Holy City. The City of God turns glad when we stand side-by-side with those who have suffered deep injustice. Gladness comes when we treat one another tenderly, when we tend one another's wounds, when we make the needs of others our own. Gladness comes when we cannot rest until all of God's children—old ones and young ones, black and brown and yellow and white ones, rich ones and poor ones, straight ones and gay ones feast fully at God's great welcome table.

All week long I've puzzled over two questions—“What makes the City of God glad?” and “What makes God glad?” I thought they were two separate questions yielding two entirely different answers. Now I'm not so sure.

I'm beginning to wonder. Could it be that the streams that make glad the City of God are streams of justice, streams of mercy, streams of humbly walking with God? Could it be that when we build our lives on the rock of justice and mercy we make God glad?

There is a river whose streams make glad God and the God's Holy City—a river of justice, a river of mercy, a river of Love. May we step into that river.