



SERMONS THAT WORK

Easter 6 (C)

For the Healing of All Nations

[RCL] Acts 16:9-15; Psalm 67; Revelation 21:10, 22-22:5; John 14:23-29 or John 5:1-9

These days, in our nation, in the public square, in many churches, there is a tendency toward Christian nationalism. To many of our fellow Christians, this may seem attractive and persuasive, because it includes the teaching that God favors America above all other nations. It can give people a sense of security and belonging—one of the strongest human needs.

The ancient Hebrews also believed that God favored them above all other nations, that they were the chosen people, and that, no matter what they did, God would still belong to them and that the Day of the Lord was reserved for them, together with all good things.

It's easy to seduce people with such beliefs while ignoring the fact that they exclude the majority of humanity. Some biblical passages are used to justify this exclusivity, while others, like those of today's lectionary, bely such interpretation. In the passages we read, we are struck by the repetition of the words, *all nations*. In the first lesson from Revelation, we read, "The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it." And later, we find the words, "The glory and the honor of the nations."

Then, there is that remarkable repetition in Psalm 67—notice the words "all nations."

Let your ways be known upon earth,
your saving health among all nations.
Let the peoples praise you, O God;
let all the peoples praise you.
Let the nations be glad and sing for joy,
for you judge the peoples with equity
and guide all the nations upon earth.

And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.

Even a nation as exclusive as ancient Israel was aware that they could not keep God just to themselves; that this great God was open to being praised by all nations; that other nations could also be guided and judged by this bountiful God.

God is for every one of us, no matter our nationality, our origin, our color, our beliefs, our prejudices, our status, our needs.

The stunning and mysterious Book of Revelation, which so often is quoted by triumphalist Christians who enjoy thinking that they only will be saved while others perish eternally is, by contrast, a book that shows the sovereignty of God over *all peoples*. The tree of life is for the healing of all nations.

Let's move to the first century: Paul, Silas, and his companions—among them the writer Luke—know that the Lord Jesus who has transformed their lives is also available to all nations. Up to this point in the telling of his story and travels, Paul has been content to stay in the interior of Asia Minor, on the eastern shore of the Aegean Sea. He is comfortable with these people, even though he visits so many different cities and provinces. The enormous Roman Empire has taken into itself not only Judea but also Lycia and Phrygia and the peoples of the Galatia region. Under the Romans, they have a common language in Latin, and the educated among them can communicate in Greek. Paul, having been born and taught in Tarsus, knows Cilicia also. According to Luke, their peoples have been receptive to the gospel: “So the churches were strengthened in the faith and increased in numbers daily.” Paul and his fellow missionaries can rest in this knowledge. But then God sends a message to Paul: This is not enough. There are more nations hungry for the Word. All of Europe lies to the west of what he knows. He now must go into the unknown.

Macedonia, in the southernmost part of Europe, had been the realm of Alexander the Great and of his father, Philip II. The language was Greek all over the province but populated by people who had arrived there from many other places in the East and Far East, places that Alexander had conquered; he had ordered his soldiers to marry foreign women and to share Greek culture with them. After his untimely death, his generals, together with their troops, spread around the eastern Mediterranean mixing races and nationalities everywhere. When the Romans arrived three centuries later, they allowed the populations to retain their cultures while bringing them under their military power. Their leaders made sure that all new lands were populated by veterans of their wars.

Thus, at the time of Jesus and then Paul, there was a tremendous diversity of races and nationalities all over the Mediterranean basin. When Paul is asked in a dream to visit Macedonia, he does not hesitate. He becomes the first evangelist to take the gospel to Europe. He first passes through Troas, the ancient city of Troy made known through Homer's epics. He sails to Samothrace, one of the most beautiful Greek islands of the northern Aegean, and from there to Neapolis, the port of the province of Philippi. The city is only eight kilometers from Neapolis. Originally named for Alexander's father, it has become an important Roman province in the first century. Paul must be aware that his own people, the Jews, have established communities in many great cities in their continuing diaspora. He knows that in the urban environments

where he is most at home, he will find clusters of people who have come to be known as “God-fearing.” The One God of the Jews was known outside Judea because of these God-fearing people. So, when he and his friends go outside the city gates of Philippi to try to find a synagogue, they are charmed by a group of women who are rinsing the powerful and very expensive purple cloth that will be sold to many rich folks. A successful merchant woman named Lydia is the leader of the women by the river, and she is not a native. Full of curiosity, longing for a God she probably had heard of, she now realizes that this Great God is approachable through Jesus the Christ, someone well known to Paul, who is eager to share his passion with everyone he meets.

It is of great interest that Paul’s teaching and the women’s confession of their desire to belong to this Christ happens within this first day, because afterwards, Lydia offers them her hospitality. The first group from a new continent has recognized – through Paul – the God for whom they had been longing but had not known by God’s Holy Name.

Christian nationalism doesn’t exist in the New Testament. The good news of the resurrected Christ is available to *all*. During this Eastertide, we are commanded to embrace all nations in the Name of Jesus, for the healing of all nations. Amen.

***Katerina Katsarika Whitley** was born in the capital of the Greek province of Macedonia, Thessaloniki. Feeling very close to the Acts of the Apostles and to the Letters of St. Paul to her ancestors, she wrote a novel about the first century and the miracle of love that attracted pagans to Christianity. A New Love, a Novel of the First Century, was published by Material Media of San Antonio, an Episcopal small press.*