

Nancy Heisey, June 28, 2015
Psalm 65 : “Laudato Si”

Introduction

--do you remember May 2013?

--The water crisis began Wednesday, when water flowing from the taps in Montréal began turning brown.

--City officials said the problem derived from the Atwater water filtration plant, the country’s second-largest filtration plant, which was in its fourth year of extensive maintenance work.

--For reasons not clear at the time, water levels in a reservoir dipped to an unusually low level on Tuesday during the renovation work. That stirred up sediment. Workers refilled the reservoir, but early Wednesday morning residents of St. Henri and Verdun complained about brown water from their taps.

--my EMU students, whom I had scolded for rushing off to Walmart when we arrived to buy cases of bottled water, looked at me and said, “See?” What did I expect in a foreign country, they seemed to be hinting.

--Here’s another water story. When I worked with MCC in Burkina Faso, I was visiting a northern village with one of our workers where they were building a dam to retain water during the rainy season. The rains were late, and the village well was nearly dry. The only time it recharged enough to give up a little water was overnight, and the women would gather there early in the morning to scoop up what they could.

--we stayed overnight and slept in the courtyard, as was the custom. During the night a big sandstorm blew up, and in the morning, we were all grimy. The woman of the house came to me with a small pot of water, and said, “Here, this is so you can wash.” But I couldn’t take it. I guessed it was almost all of the water we had.

--when we met with the villagers, and talked about how they were desperately waiting for the rains to come, our Burkinabè well technician took out his guitar, and began to sing softly: “Tout dépend de toi, Seigneur, tout dépend de toi.”

I Our psalm for the day begins with an emphatic: “To you!”

--our translations don’t do this justice; I checked both French and English

--we hear: “Praise” as the first word. But the poet begins with the address to the Holy One who will receive all that we say and sing. Le-kah! A toi!

--the poem is about God’s great generosity and abundance, about God’s acts both personal and cosmic; but first of all, it is a reminder that the God being addressed is one who may be called “Toi.”

--a familiar and a cosmic God! In theological terms, the immanent and the transcendent. When we think of praise, we often get stuck in the middle of this warp and woof. So our question today is, what should we offer to the Toi who created the universe? What is praise that is honest, and worthy, and adequate?

II The poet surprises us again: The very next word is SILENCE. Or... Silence is praise, or EVEN silence is praise

--again, the translations shy away from this strange and mighty claim.

--we tend to think of praise as sound, even as noise. In the apostolic church I attended in Burkina Faso, the first 45 minutes were given over to “louange” which meant standing, singing, clapping, dancing, waving handkerchiefs, and generally getting “revved up” for the rest of the culte.

--in my Menno congregation in Harrisonburg, we are much more sedate; but still, praise means music! Singing! Instruments! Antiphonal litanies!

--the ancient poet challenges our natural reaction. He recognizes something more complex than OUR voices and our instruments and our activities as praise. Praise, even in Zion, even in the temple, is cosmic in dimension.

--the second section of the psalm, vv.5-8, underlines how all of creation praises God

--but we know there is no sound when there is no air. So how do “the gateways of the morning and the evening shout for joy”?

--so what does the universe sound like:

<http://www.scientificamerican.com/video/what-does-the-universe-sound-like-2013-09-13/>

III These sound-symbols bring us back to our water theme

--because for human beings, water is God’s most precious, and most essential gifts

--if you read up on the history of the cosmos, you find that most scientists agree that our universe began about 13.8 billion years ago

--the universe is based on some very simple rules (as best as I can understand it): negative and positive charges—which leads to electrons and protons, which leads to atoms, which leads to elements, which leads to molecules—which leads to water. H₂O.

--now the scientists think it took about 3.8 billion years to get from the Big Bang to water—and water is necessary for life as we know it.

--I’m not going to try to cover all this territory—and perhaps you have a different perspective on life as we know it. We do know that the probes going out into space are looking for signs of water. There are lots of other things we want to

know about the universe, but one of the heartfelt questions we have is: Is there life (as we know it) anywhere else in the universe? If there is, water would be a very big sign.

--we know that the human body is largely made up of water—almost 90% when we are born, and still 50-60 percent as we become full grown

--it's intriguing that our praise psalm starts with the God who is familiar, Toi! First it sets its praise in the temple, but immediately it calls on "all flesh," "tout être de chair" to come and praise. So, everything that needs water to exist is called to praise.

--when the poem moves beyond the center of worship in the temple, it swings outward to the bounds of the cosmos—the ends of the earth, the distant seas, the fixed mountains (worldview—they hold up the sky), the raging seas (worldview—where people would drop into the abyss), the gateways of the morning and the evening.

--these are places for whom even silence is praise

IV And then we come back down to earth

--on earth, though, for the poet, while praise has to do with human flourishing, the praise is "wordless"—the growing grain, the stream full of water, desert pastures dripping with rich food, meadows covered with flocks, valleys decked out with grain

--these are the images of the Thanksgiving season (and this psalm is the basis for the hymn by Anna Barbauld, "Praise to God Immortal, Praise," HWB 91)

--I love the season of harvest—its colors, its flavors, and its singing; with my family, I was taught that the Thanksgiving service was one of the most important services of the church year

--I love the sense of gratitude that wells up in me, when I look into my back yard and see my little garden—mostly weeded, five tomato plants reaching bravely toward the sun, bees buzzing around the lavender, red-veined sorrel needing to be clipped and sprinkled into salads.

--but I also remember—not only the Burkinabè woman with the pot of water. I remember standing in a dusty village in Mozambique, with a group of people gathered around a small boy who was dying, having starved beyond the point of recovery during the civil war.

--I remember the flood scenes from Superstorm Sandy and the photographs of skeletons of cattle on drought-stricken fields

--this perpetual intersection of images makes praise a complicated matter; can I praise for my bounty when others do not have it?

--perhaps for us, silence INSTEAD of praise is what we should be doing? But that's not what the poet says

--In a recent daily devotional from “Rejoice,” Katarina Friesen was reflecting on the Lord’s Prayer, while working in her garden. She asked: God, why don’t you give everyone their daily bread?

--there was a time of silence, and then she heard God saying: “I do”
(Rejoice, June-August 2015, p.15)

V That answer is the setting in which we praise

--back at the beginning, the second Le-Kah: “a Toi,” asserts that “on accomplit des vœux.”—To you, we keep our vows

--What does this mean? Could it be that keeping our vows and recognizing the complexity of praise go together?

--we are all human, and we are very aware that a common human response is *do ut des*. (I learned that in Latin class—a statement about the gods of Rome): I give in order to receive. God, if you help me find my keys, I’ll volunteer to drive the refugee family to language class. Or whatever.

--rather, after describing praise, the poet calls us to come to God, who is just; the word in Hebrew gets written “righteousness” in nearly every English version, but some French versions use “justice.”

--In silence, we recognize that we haven’t kept up our part of the amazing world we’ve been given—although planting a bee-friendly garden, or working in the food pantry, may be a step in that direction!

--we come close to God, recognizing how often we have missed the mark, and we allow God’s forgiveness to flow through us. We say nothing—at least not at first

--Silence allows to pay attention: what around us is beautiful? We rejoice in it! What around us is abundant? We enjoy it, and we share it. We sing, and dance.

--Pope Francis, whose recent encyclical begins with the words of Saint Francis: *Laudato Si*, Praise be to you; *Louange à Toi!*, moves in the second paragraph to our Sister Earth now crying out to us: What is ugly, or broken, or angry, also calls for our response.

--this praise is the praise of care for justice, loving, not frantic, saving of water. Compassionate, not guilty, sharing our means with the poor. The mission of *Maison de l’Amitié* has been part of this praise for decades

--If God is saying to us, “I DO give to each her daily bread,” then our vows, our baptismal vows, our human vows, mean that our praise is both celebration and sharing.

--and when we praise, we repeat, “*Tout dépend de Toi*,” We also remember that together with “*tout chair*” our coming to this Holy One means the praise of sharing.