

The Light of Us

Psalm 67

I want to reflect with you on Psalm 67 in light of themes in the Gospel of John, specifically Jesus as the light of the world. The Greek text claims that he is the light of the cosmos.

I'm not trained as an astronomer, but perhaps you, too, have heard that a significant percentage of the stars visible in our night sky are actually extinct. They are so far away from us that by the time their light reaches us, the stars are no more. I am not going to pretend to know anything about the space-time continuum except to draw an analogy to our life. This feature of starlight implies that nothing lasts forever, including the things that appear constant, and that actions have far-flung and unimaginable consequences, even after our death.

With that in mind, I'd like to offer a prayer-poem written by Sue Mannshardt, who recently went beyond the stars.

May the Holy Spirit whisper in the quiet in that still small voice.

May the Holy Spirit challenge and empower us toward healing and wholeness.

May the Holy Spirit inspire us toward loving and following the Jesus Way. Amen.

I'm thinking about light because of the first verse of Psalm 67 about God's face shining upon us. I wonder, just who exactly are the "us," and, relatedly, who is not included? The phrase "God's face shining" comes from the Book of Numbers, where Moses instructs Aaron to use it as a blessing for the priests of Israel. In this context, the "us" is a very small group of men who lead a very tiny nation.

Yet Psalm 67 immediately jumps to envisioning God's light shining upon all peoples and nations. As Christians, this universal light echoes the theology of the Gospel of John, the light of the cosmos.

We live under a national administration with an America First policy, which affects both domestic and foreign affairs and national and international interests. The rhetoric of America First is generally explicit about prioritizing American power and wealth, although our Secretary of State recently told our international allies that America First was also in their best interests.

I am not a politician or political science expert, so I will only speak from the biblical perspective, which is my area of study. The Bible unequivocally

demonstrates that a nation-first policy leads to disastrous outcomes. Elevating the nation is idolatrous, meaning that something supersedes God. Granted, the idolatrous rulers of antiquity claimed to elevate divine power, but the clear danger is to make God in the image of the nation. Nations, like stars, do not last forever. This "us" demonizes "them," which is not reflective of the light of Christ.

I understand that it's Memorial Day weekend, and my intention is not to undermine the sacrifices made by those in armed services. I have never been to war, so I cannot speak to it. I will declare my profound admiration for those who have enlisted, fought, and lost their fellow soldiers and are now the fiercest critics against starting another war. These veterans are the first to ask all of us to use our energy, intelligence, creativity, and love to fight against the forces of destruction and oppression, not just for America but for the better lights of all humanity.

Again, I wish to stay on sure footing with what I know. Psalm 67 is not only a biblical text but also a poem, another area of personal study. Scholars term Psalm 67 an example of a poem of "joyful accumulation," which is a way of identifying verses that start with something small and declare it has far-flung consequences. Psalm 67 points to the harvest of food as a specific sign of God's care, which then accumulates and expands for the entire earth, all nations, and all peoples.

Thinking of a harvest, another poem of joyful accumulation is Ross Gay's "To the Fig Tree on 9th and Christian." Somehow, this tree, which is native to the Mediterranean and that rocky, sunbaked soil, has immigrated to the urban Northeast and the City of Brotherly Love, Philadelphia. The poet discovers the tree by accident, and, even better, the figs are ripe! People stare up into the branches and the fruit above. Ross writes, "I am tall and good for these things." So he reaches and plucks the fruit to share it with fellow pedestrians. People of diverse ages, ethnicities, and nationalities are enjoying the food, laughing, and celebrating a feast. This scene takes place in Philadelphia, which, despite its name, the poem identifies as "a city, like most / which has murdered its own / people." Painfully poignant truth five years after the murder of George Floyd.

And yet, Ross ends the poem, "We are feeding each other ... / strangers maybe / never again."

This is the light of a good poem and of holy scripture—light that not only illumines the injustice but also points beyond it, like a gift that generates goodwill and grace. Like light that begins at one specific point and beams out beyond anyone's imagination.

This light is God's gift to us so we can share it with all nations, for Jesus is the light of the world.

So, how about you and I start where we are, dealing with what we know and who we know? Ross Gay wrote, “Strangers maybe never again.” That maybe gives me hope. Maybe we will point to God’s light that shines in the darkness, and the darkness cannot overcome it. Maybe—may it be so.

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