

“When Boasting Is Not Bad”

Psalm 20 (NRSV)

What do you think about **our Prime Minister’s recent trip to Canada’s Arctic**, asserting Canada’s sovereignty over our vast northern territories? Even **we ourselves** sometimes assert in our **national anthem**, “with glowing hearts, we see Thee rise, the true north strong and free” and then declare, “O Canada, we stand on guard for Thee.” Is that realistic, given that, after Russia, we have the second largest landmass in the world, bounded by three oceans, with 243,791 km. of coastline and 8,893 km. of land borders with the United States of America? Further, if the almost 3,000 personnel serving overseas were to come home, we would have only 62,000 military personnel, including 9,000 sailors, 12,500 air force personnel and 19,500 soldiers ready to defend our country. Perhaps one should add the 25,000 reservists, but neither the numbers of our combined Armed Forces, nor our small supply of ships, planes and artillery seem to be anywhere near sufficient to do the job. **Sometimes I wonder if our bold assertions of Canadian sovereignty aren’t actually rather empty boasts.**

Compare the situation in **ancient Israel**, a rather small country, caught between the superpowers of the day: there were enemies to the north and to the south and to the east and to the west. That’s the context of Psalm 20.

Here’s what prompted this psalm. Weary to the point of breaking, the courier had arrived at the palace. In swift, breathy words, like the panting of a dog on a summer day, he gasped his news to the palace guard and together they rushed inside to alert the king. The king’s face grew dark as the courier poured out the message. He’d been dispatched by the base commander at Engedi on the west shore of the Salt Sea. The king’s garrison there had been embattled by troops from Moab and Ammon that had skirted the southern tip of the Salt Sea and then moved north against the forces of the king. Judah’s borders had been violated; the women and children of her southern reaches were in jeopardy; the crops and flocks of her villages were threatened.

The king’s decision was swift. His first move was not to gather his military officers in the army’s briefing room; it was to **assemble his people in prayer**. Apparently, he believed his nation’s first and foremost need wasn’t military strategy; it was **spiritual counsel**.

1. **An appropriate boast is in the Lord.**

It was such a situation – **an invasion and a call to prayer** – that framed the setting for Psalm 20. Though we do not know which invasion prompted it, or which king was actually featured in it, we have a good illustration of the type of occasion in which it would have been used, in the experience of **King Jehoshaphat**. The story is told in the Bible’s book of II Chronicles, chapter 20. Here are some excerpts:

... the Moabites and Ammonites, and with them some of the Menunites, came against Jehoshaphat for battle. Messengers came and told Jehoshaphat, “A great multitude is coming against you from Edom, from beyond the sea; already they are at Hazazontamar” (that is, Engedi). Jehoshaphat was afraid; he set himself to seek the Lord, and proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah. Judah assembled to seek help from the Lord; from all the towns of Judah they came to seek the Lord.

Jehoshaphat stood in the assembly of Judah and Jerusalem, in the house of the Lord, before the new court, and said, “O Lord, God of our ancestors, are you not God in heaven? Do you not rule over all the kingdoms of the nations? In your hand are power and might, so that no one is able to withstand you. O our God, will you not execute judgment upon them? For we are powerless against this great multitude that is coming against us. We do not know what to do, but our yes are upon you” (II Chron. 20:1-6, 12).

The psalms are **psalms for all seasons**, including psalms for the eve of battle, whatever those battles may be. How people respond in **crisis** shows us something of their inner life. You may remember **the morning of 9/11**. Wherever you were, you were impacted. It impressed me deeply that all over North America **people came to church that morning to pray**. We sensed we needed some answers from God during that terrible onslaught that struck us as being very close to home. In their better moments the men and women of Israel were like that. Bad news, terrifying surprise, jolting trouble sent them to prayer. And **the psalms were their prayer book**.

Psalm 20 demonstrates not only **the occasion of prayer** – the eve of battle – but also something of **the ritual of prayer**, a ritual in which priests, lay people, and the king all took part.

The priests continued the ritual after **the king** had first lifted his petition to God, as Jeshoshaphat had done. We are not given the king's petition, but only the priests' response to his prayer:

The Lord answer you in the day of trouble!
 The name of the God of Jacob protect you!
 May he send you help from the sanctuary,
 and give you support from Zion.
 May he remember all your offerings,
 and regard with favour your burnt sacrifices. (20:1-3)

Next **the people**, summoned to the Temple in the heat of the crisis, expressed their communal hopes for God's blessing on the king, their leader in battle,

May he grant you your heart's desire,
 and fulfill all your plans.
 May we shout for joy over your victory,
 and in the name of our God set up our banners.
 May the Lord fulfill all your petitions! (20:4-5)

At this point in the dramatic, antiphonal phrasing of the prayer, you might have expected a few moments of **silence**, the quiet of waiting for the voice of God. Hopefully, the Lord would speak to the king and his people through **a prophet**, present in the congregation or up with the choir.

This is precisely what happened in Jehoshaphat's case. Here is the chronicler's own description:

Meanwhile all Judah stood before the Lord, with their little ones, their wives and their children [probably, their young people]. Then the spirit of the Lord came upon Jahaziel, ..., a Levite of the sons of Asaph, in the middle of the assembly. He said, "Listen, all Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem, and King Jeshoshaphat: Thus says the Lord to you: 'Do not fear or be dismayed at this great multitude; for the battle is not yours but God's. This battle is not for you to fight; take your position, stand still, and see the victory of the Lord on your behalf, O Judah and Jerusalem.' [And then he added, on his own behalf,] 'Do not fear of be dismayed; tomorrow go out against them and the Lord will be with you'" (II Chron. 20:13-17).

It must have been some word like that – some assurance of God’s presence and blessing, some promise of victory – that prompted **the king** present in the situation of the psalm to utter these confident lines:

Now I know that the Lord will help his anointed;
 he will answer him from his holy heaven
 and with mighty victories by his right hand.
 Some take pride in chariots, and some in horses,
 But our pride is in the name of the Lord our God.
 They will collapse and fall,
 but we shall rise and stand upright. (20:6)

Then the liturgy of this prayer before battle closed with the priests and the people together lifting up their voices in a ringing wish fulfillment affirmation, which was also a song of hope,

Give victory to the king, O Lord;
 answer us when we call. (20:9)

2. Why boasting is usually bad.

It’s **the king’s attitude** that stands out in this extraordinary psalm. **Pride** is an occupational hazard with rulers. Their power to command and the necessary allegiance which most of the people give them tend to make them self-sufficient, or at least to rely on their accoutrements of power. They try to deal from strength, and they feel it is important to appear strong no matter what their actual situation may be. For example, how many dictators have relied on their military forces to put on a strong show? Don’t we remember how many successive Soviet leaders, as well as the rather foolish current communist North Korean leader, have trotted out showy military May Day parades? Most of us knew then and know now that their power was not and is actually not all that great.

Goliath was the Philistines’ ancient example of the same thing. His sheer size was meant to impress: “... his height was six cubits and a span. He had a helmet of bronze upon his head, and he was armed with a coat of mail; the weight of the coat was five thousand shekels of bronze. He had greaves of bronze on his legs and a javelin of bronze slung between his shoulders. The shaft of his spear was like a weaver’s beam, and his spear’s head weighed six hundred shekels of iron” (1 Sam. 17:4b-7a).

Goliath was meant to terrify. Further, the Bible records his smug boasting: To the armies of Israel he said, “Why have you [bothered] to come out to draw up for battle? Am I not a Philistine, and are you not servants of [that puny, worthless king,] Saul?” (1 Sam. 17:8). And to David he said, “Am I a dog, that you come to me with sticks? And the Philistine cursed David by his gods. [Then] the Philistine said to David, ‘Come to me, and I will give your flesh to the birds of the air and to the wild animals of the field’” (1 Sam. 17:43-44).

None of this type of boasting passed the lips of the king in this psalm. **His boast was in the name of the Lord.** So, too, the apostle Paul once wrote, “[I could certainly boast about all my credentials and extensive experiences, nevertheless,] if I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness” (2 Cor. 11:30). Why? Because the Lord’s “grace [was] sufficient” for him, for God’s “power [was] made perfect in weakness.” Therefore, he declared, “I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me.” (2 Cor. 12:8, 9).

Most **boasting** is bad. It is **an affront to God.** It takes human credit for what are really divine gifts and God-given opportunities. Most boasting is bad because it chokes out worship. It is virtually impossible to sing, “Praise God from whom all blessings flow” and “Look at what I have accomplished” at the same time.

Most **boasting** is bad. It is **an insult to others.** When we give the impression that we are superior, others are tempted to doubt their gifts. We make them feel cheated. Their gratitude to God for what they are may be smothered under the blanket of our haughtiness. And we may also provoke bizarre reactions in others, like defensiveness, where they may be taunted to asserting themselves in order to compete with us. In other words, it appears **boasting can be catching**, like the H1N1 virus or so-called “swine flu” is spread by a carrier who doesn’t even know what harm he or she is inflicting.

3. **How boasting is kept in check.**

Psalm 20 is a good antidote to this epidemic of this over the top self-assurance and arrogance. It gives a formula for keeping the wrong kind of boasting in check.

It begins with **God's people gathered in the sanctuary**, as the prayer for the king indicated: "May [God] send you help from the sanctuary, and give you support from Zion" (20:2). A declaration of dependence upon God – that is what their gathering meant. They did not mobilize their troops in self-defense, nor flee the city in panic. They went to the Temple to declare their hope in God.

Next, **God's people offered sacrifices**, as was their custom when confronting emergencies: "May [God] remember all your offerings, and regard with favour your burnt sacrifices" (20:3). An acknowledgement of sin and a petition for God's favour – those are primarily what the sacrifices meant. Neither the people nor their king paraded through the public streets in pomp and majesty. They did not rally their horses, nor rattle their sabers. They went to the Temple to confess their needs to God.

Finally, **God's people honoured the name of the Lord**, as they centered their celebration in him, "May we shout for joy over your victory, and in the name of God set up our banners" (20:5a). An expression of adoration – that is what those banners meant. Not to the regiments was tribute to be paid; not to the general or the admiral were the trophies to be awarded. The Lord's name, the Lord's person, the Lord's glory was the theme of their jubilation.

Their boasting was kept in check. God's grace and power, not human endeavour, became the center of their living and praying – especially in the hour of their crisis.

4. **When boasting becomes acceptable.**

When it comes down to it, there are only **two options** in life. We can boast of "the horses" and "the chariots" of our accomplishments – and become obnoxious, or we can boast of the name of the Lord, our God, and become acceptable to him and to others. If God is God, either the Lord is our protection, or we have none. And, further, our emotional defenses are no match for his power and righteousness, his mercy and grace. When it comes down to it, there are only two options in life – and only **two results**: those who trust in "horses" and "chariots" will "collapse and fall"; those who boast in the name of the Lord "shall rise and stand upright" (20:8).

If the couriers in your life bring you breathless news of threatened attack, in what will you boast? Good health, education, work, cleverness, prestige, reputation, wealth, power? Like “horses” and “chariots” they cannot stand.

Let your boasting, your hoping, your glorying be in the name of the Lord our God, and in his Son, our Saviour, Jesus Christ. Such boasting is never bad.

Amen

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