

Our God is Mighty to Save

- ¹⁹ **At Horeb they made a calf and worshiped an idol cast from metal.**
²⁰ **They exchanged their glorious God for an image of a bull, which eats grass.**
²¹ **They forgot the God who saved them, who had done great things in Egypt,**
²² **miracles in the land of Ham and awesome deeds by the Red Sea.**
²³ **So he said he would destroy them— had not Moses, his chosen one,**
stood in the breach before him to keep his wrath from destroying them.
⁴⁰ **Therefore [later] the LORD was angry with his people and abhorred his inheritance.**
⁴¹ **He gave them into the hands of the nations, and their foes ruled over them.**
⁴² **Their enemies oppressed them and subjected them to their power.**
⁴³ **Many times he delivered them, but they were bent on rebellion**
and they wasted away in their sin.
⁴⁷ **Save us, LORD our God, and gather us from the nations,**
that we may give thanks to your holy name and glory in your praise.
⁴⁸ **Praise be to the LORD, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting.**
Let all the people say, “Amen!” Praise the LORD.

Psalm 106 doesn't list an author, and while it could well be David there are a couple of other good candidates. But whoever the human writer was, the Holy Spirit worked through him to remind us of this amazing truth: No matter what our sins, our God is mighty to save.

Forty days ago it was June 1st (Sunday: 2nd). Imagine for a moment that you are on a long vacation, a camping trip to a wilderness you've never been in before. June 1st (2nd) was the last time you saw your guide; your group leader. He went up a tall hill, you might even call it a small mountain, and he said to wait here for him while he got instructions, and you've been waiting here for nearly six weeks.

How many of us would still be waiting at the foot of the mountain? Of course, it's not the best comparison since the Israelites were running for their lives away from the Egyptian heavy cavalry but maybe in some small way we can understand why, even though they didn't exactly wander away from the mountain, they began looking elsewhere for leadership and for worship. They were wandering away from God.

“**They exchanged their glorious God for an image of a bull, which eats grass.**” A poet can do things with language that an historian usually can't. The outrage of Moses coming down the mountain and smashing the original tablets of the Ten Commandments is not softened at all by our poet who describes the alternative deity as a cud-chewing moo-cow. The language of the Psalm only shines new light into the depth of the sin. The poetry takes the statements from Exodus, “What is this thing you have done?” and added emotion to it: “What have you done!?”

A cow! They made a bullcalf, probably life-sized, a sculpture that they cast. But it wasn't the craftsmanship that was the problem. It was the worship that spun them down into a sin against the First Commandment. What have you done!?"

As we are led to see our sins in all the seriousness of their guilt, we are drawn into the horror of the full realization of what that guilt will lead to. The passionate poetry of the Psalm silences our human excuses, hurls us to the very bottom of the pit of our shame, and then the word of God does what only the word of God can do. It draws our attention away from our fear of hell, away from our addiction to the delights of this world, and even away from the esoteric ecstasies of escapist dreams, as all of it drops away, inadequate, unfulfilling, and at long last we are left only with God; only with Jesus Christ our Lord, who is mighty to save.

"They forgot the God who saved them... who performed miracles in the Land of Ham."

That doesn't mean Pig Country, but it refers to the world after the great Flood, when Israel's ancestor, Noah's son Shem and his family, went one place to live, and another son Japheth and his family went to live in Germany and Norway, and the third son, Ham, went to live in places like Egypt. Those Hamites fell into idolatry and strange ways of living. A different language, different customs, different musical tastes, no Netflix.

Israel had gone there by invitation from Israel's son Joseph but after Joseph's death and shortly before Moses' birth the people had been enslaved because of national unrest in Egypt and a national paranoia for anybody who wasn't a native Egyptian. The Israelites were abused and accused of being the problem for everything wrong with Egypt, but God rescued his people-- these people of our Psalm who had been abused for a generation but were too impatient to wait for their Savior for just a little over five weeks.

"He said he would destroy them, but Moses, his chosen one, stood in the breach." Here is one of those glorious, "As then, so now" moments in the Old Testament here. God was poised to annihilate his people right there at the foot of the mountain because of the sin of their idolatry. But Moses his chosen one stood in the breach. In case you don't know, a *perets* or "breach" is break in a wall made with flung stones by a besieging army. This was not the picture of some future punishment by God, as if awaiting them on judgment day. No, this was a breach.

And let's explore this word "breach" for another moment. Normally, a city under siege wants to make its defenses stronger. Normally, a city under siege does not teach down its own walls. In one act, the fashioning of the golden calf, the people of Israel went from being God's bride, his rescued people, to being his enemy, and the word-picture is of a city—the city of God in the wilderness—defending themselves against whom? Against God their rescuer? It doesn't make any sense, but there it is. And then they breached their own wall from within and just as God, the God of Armies, the Lord Almighty himself strode in to obliterate them, one man stood up to pray for them. Coming down the mountain alongside God's holy fury came Moses. And he asked God to have mercy.

As then, so now. As God looked at his fallen world and sent his Son into it to call us all to repentance, the insanity of fallen, sinful mankind wanted to kill him. There were mere handfuls of believers left, not much more than the single family of Shem, Ham and Japheth and their dad

and their wives on the ark. There was a handful of faithful women and a dozen or so believing men? Not a dozen tribes, but a dozen, no, less than a dozen, disciples. Once again the world had thrown up a wall against their Maker and then tore it apart with unbelief from within, and as God was preparing to annihilate the whole thing, one man came down alongside God's holy fury. Along came Jesus. And he asked God to have mercy. Jesus did more than Moses. Moses averted the blow, put it off for another day. Jesus stepped into the breach and took the blow; he let the full fury of God's wrath pummel him to let it all be extinguished in his flesh in our place.

If he had been just one man, even a prophet, his death would have amounted to a minor tragedy. Awe, that's too bad. His mother's tears would have fallen, and then, he would have been forgotten. But here was the divine Son of God. He didn't die partly guilty himself, he died holy and perfect and in my place. In your place. Here was the Son of God who was there in the creation. When God said, "Let there be," it was the voice his Son, the Word of God, who had spoken, and that was the voice silenced by God's wrath. Here was the answer to prayer of the Psalm: **"Save us, Lord our God."** He is mighty to save.

He did save.

So what do we do with such a great salvation?

- The top of the list must always be: We give glory to God.
- We give him thanks with our lives. That "thanks" means setting aside present sins, preparing to avoid upcoming temptations.
- Third, we keep ourselves in touch with God's word by reading it, praying about it, asking questions about it, questions of the text, questions to our pastors or to a mature Christian in your life, as Paul tells us to in 1 Corinthians 14.
- Next, we pray for the people in our lives. On the one hand, we thank God for them, and on the other hand, we step into the breach on their behalf, asking God to forgive, to bless, to uplift, and to make them spectacular examples of Christian love and service. Pray boldly!
- Finally, review your Catechism. The commandments, the prayer, the creed, the sacraments. When we hear preachers on the radio or on YouTube from other denominations, and something doesn't quite sound right, can I recognize what's wrong? Does he fail to give Jesus honor for being the Savior? Does he make me feel as if I have to "do" something to be saved? Don't get behind his walls. There's a breach opening there already. He's going to shout, "Lord, Lord," pretty soon, and he will not like the answer.

"Praise the Lord, the God of Israel," our Savior Jesus Christ, for stepping into the breach on our behalf, purely because he loves. Show him your love by loving one another, and never lose sight of the gospel of forgiveness that has erupted in our lives like a golden summer sunrise: Our sins are forgiven! Our God is mighty to save! Amen.