

Text: Psalm 85
Title: Speaking *Shalom*
Date: 07.24.22
Roger Allen Nelson

On a late summer night, with a hint of autumn at the edges, my daughter and I caught the train to see Wilco at Pritzker Pavilion in Millennium Park. As the sky went dark, the skyline lit up, and all the colors of the city were mashed together on the brushed metallic shapes soaring above the stage. The sound was exquisite,
the sky cloudless,
the air crisp,
the show sold out,
and the crowd was trendy-cool and self-absorbed.

With my daughter beside me – texting a boy and tolerating my musical tastes – life felt full, rich, good. Abundant.

Wilco is a scruffy-Chicago-based-rock-n-roll-band fronted by Jeff Tweedy. They play a sort of alternative-america-dissonant-white-guy-dad-rock. (That's a genre.) I've lost track of how many times I've seen them.

Midway through the show Wilco began a song with a gentle melody that rose to a cataclysmic noisy climax and then fell away to a barely voiced whisper:

Searching for home, searching for home, searching for home, via Chicago, I'm coming home, I'm coming home, I'm coming home, via Chicago...

And, hushed and holy, the crowd of 11,000 sang along.

Now. I'm not a hand raiser in church, but my hands went-up as tears welled-up with deep thanksgiving for the sheer beauty of it all. My daughter, the music, and the night were overwhelmingly grace-full. As a crowd of young professionals sang of their search for home....

Maybe that reads too much into the lyrics and the moment, but it felt like a hymn-sing for those trying to find healthy honest relationships,
a sense of purpose,
something bigger than self,
and a place to belong.

In a word, it was a mighty chorus of people longing for *shalom*.

Biblically understood, *shalom* is more than a feeling and far more than the absence of conflict. *Shalom* is defined as:

...universal flourishing, wholeness, and delight – a rich state of affairs in which natural needs are satisfied and natural gifts fruitfully employed, all under the arch of God's love.

On a summer evening, on a lawn between the lake and the towered-city-of-man, it felt like we were singing of our longing for *shalom*.

Psalm 85 is a song of *shalom*.

Consider...

Biblical scholars think that this psalm was written after the Israelites returned home from Babylonian captivity. This is a post-exilic psalm. As one writer puts it:

The prophet of the exile, Second Isaiah, imbued the exiles with hope and expectancy. However, upon the return to Jerusalem there ensued a number of disappointments and the spirit of the restoration community was deflated.

Therefore, with their homecoming hopes not fulfilled and their expectations not met, the poet acknowledges the disappointment and yet still pleads that God “restore us again,” and “revive us again.”

The “Reconciliation” section of our worship liturgy typically opens with a reminder of God’s nature or God’s activity in the past. We’re then free to name our sin with the assurance that God is merciful. We don’t confess out of fear; we confess out of faith. Likewise, the psalmist calls for revival and a fresh expression of God’s mercy – because of what God had done before.

There’s a sort of essential biblical building block here: We seek forgiveness, live with faith, and hope in the future because of God’s activity in the past. We pray for restoration and revival because of who God has been before.

So, this morning....

in a partly-post-pandemic world,
in a time of economic anxiety,
when church can feel like a proxy for culture wars,
when we disagree, disappoint, and splinter,
when our expectations are unfulfilled,
when things are cloudy and hopes are dim,
we join the psalmist in praying for restoration and revival
because of what God has done in the past.

*...revive us again, that your people may rejoice in you.
Show us your unfailing love, Lord, and grant us your salvation.*

There’s a subtle shift in the second half of the Psalm that’s muted in the English translation. The psalmist announces that he/she will “listen to what God the Lord says” when he promises peace – *shalom*. (See verse 8.) And then a few verses later *shalom* is spoken. (See verse 10.)

The opening lines remind us of what God has done,
the pivot here is to listening to God speak *shalom*....

About 23 years ago I walked into a therapist's office looking for counsel in how to help a family going through an ugly divorce. By the end of that hour the therapist had me talking about my issues and asking if we could continue our conversation. That initial meeting has led to a 23-year relationship, a mutually enriching friendship, and life-changing help in my life.

Early on in therapy my therapist/friend asked if I'd experienced my father's blessing. Given our complicated history, given his murder when we were both young, did I know my father's blessing? Had I heard him speak blessing into my life?

When a father or mother speaks blessing into their children's lives it's not just a well-meaning word, a pat on the head, or a compliment. But the words themselves confer a certain reality. The words represent or confirm what is. In their speaking the reality of blessing and its implications are made real....

In a similar fashion the psalmist is listening for God to speak *shalom* – to confer *shalom* and in doing so making its implications real.

And God speaks, saying,

*Love and faithfulness meet together; righteousness and peace kiss each other.
Faithfulness springs forth from the earth, and righteousness looks down from heaven.
The Lord will indeed give what is good, and our land will yield its harvest.*

The Westminster Confession of Faith of the 1640s list about 30 attributes of God. It's an impressive list. There's lots to count and lots to consider. And that noble list tries to magnify and maximize our understanding of God. But there's something systematic and sterile in that. It's sort of like an abstraction about love rather than the lived experience of loving someone.

The psalmist doesn't offer here a defining list of *shalom*, but rather there's a dynamic, robust, and active picture of *shalom*.

God's *hesed* (steadfast love) and faithfulness embrace.

God's righteousness and peace kiss.

And then the poet utilizes an image in which two contrasting or complimentary parts are cited to imply the whole.

God's faithfulness will spring up from the earth.

God's righteousness will look down from heaven.

All creation, from soil to sky, will be the stage for God's *shalom*.

To a post-exilic-discouraged-people this is a picture of God's character and promise. And, there's not a bigger stage or a fuller picture. God will speak *shalom* and it will be realized in creation.

And look, it's also worth noting that when Paul writes to the Colossians, he proclaims that all of this dwells in Jesus Christ. As he puts it:

For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

Or as John writes:

...the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

Dear friends, outside of their taste in music, there wasn't anything special about the crowd gathered one summer's eve at Millennium Park. And my guess is that very few connected singing-along with Wilco to longing for God's *shalom*.

But in world where young men with military weapons kill students in classrooms, families at parades, and old women at church, where creation's resources are plundered, where the scales of an equitable economy are out of whack, where war terrorizes, and the lived experience of God's love can seem missing or marred... the longing for *shalom* seems plausible.

There's something deep inside of us that wants things to be made right – not just the saving of the souls of those who get it right, but the restoration, renewal, reclamation, revival, and redemption of creation. In a word, the *shalom* of all creation. And at time of disappointment, when things weren't what they hoped or expected, the psalmist voices that longing for God to speak *shalom*.

The good news, my friends, is that God in Christ continues speaking *shalom*. Today we hear whispers, but one day love and faithfulness will embrace, righteousness and peace will kiss, and from earth's crust to heaven's farthest corner *shalom* will fill creation. Thanks be to God.

Until that day may we be agents of *shalom*.

Until that day may we bear witness to *shalom*.

Until that day may we follow the way and will of *shalom*.

Until that day may we join a mighty chorus,

*I will listen to what God the Lord says; he promises shalom to his people....
Surely his salvation is near those who fear him, that his glory may dwell in our land.*

Amen.