

January 12

The God of Glory

Psalm 29

Psalm 29 is considered by many to be one of the most ancient if not the oldest of the Psalms. It seems to be an adaptation of an ancient Canaanite hymn to Baal, a god of weather and fertility. There was much within the culture that would cause worship of Baal to be so alluring. You are going through a dry time; your crops are withering in the ground. One night in desperation you sneak out and go to the shrine of Baal on a neighboring hill. You say a little prayer, leave a little offering and go home. The next day the clouds form and the rain you have so desperately needed falls from the sky. You are hooked. You still attend the great ceremonies at the temple in Jerusalem but when it comes to weather that little shrine to Baal is your fall back.

This Psalm is a challenge to that way of thinking. We are to see God as in charge of all creation. God is to not be manipulated or controlled but to be worshiped in faith and trust. We are called upon to step back in awe at the glory of God.

Now, you might be thinking, what does this have to do with us today? After all we are not tempted to worship Baal. There isn't a shrine to him on some hill around town. But what the cult to Baal represented in its day to its people is still a temptation to us today. The religion of Baal asserted what humans are all inclined to believe in any era, that ultimately we are in control and that our efforts can ensure security. We don't believe that a pinch of incense and a prayer brings rain but we do believe that through science and technology anything is possible. Psalm 29 calls us back to faith, to remembering that God is in control and cannot be manipulated by our efforts.

We end the Lord's Prayer with this phrase, "for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory." There is something so important here that we almost always miss. As of late we have been too often called to glorify God. Now this in and of itself is not a bad thing but it is our efforts that are in front. We are told that God is glorified through our actions, our worship and our praise. While this is true, this is not what the Psalm or the prayer says. It is asking us to step back and be awed and amazed by God's glory.

All in the psalm say Glory. The angels, when they announced the birth said, “Glory to God in the highest.” We each week pray that God’s kingdom will come and we acknowledge that God is the Glory.

So today, I want us to think about how do we say “Glory” through our actions. Psalm 29 invites us to listen to all the sounds out there in the world, not the manufactured sounds of the media or on your iPod, but the chirping of crickets, the whirr of the wind, the clap of thunder, the rush of a stream, the lowing of cattle, and the din of a village celebration. All these sounds, together, can be summarized in a single word. That word is “Glory!” We are called to contemplate the glory of the Lord. To drink in the sheer grandeur, wonder, incomprehensible, and yet revealed greatness of God. When we do this and are overwhelmed by the unutterable magnificence of the Lord, we too will cry out a single word: “Glory!”

When was the last time you were so filled with the presence of God that you had to say “Glory?” This is one of those times where you feel God so close that it makes your heart hurt with joy and love. I recall a time like this soon after my father passed away. He died in early October and a week or so later it was a glorious sunny day. I decided to take a hike. We were living in Bellingham and there was a trail that I had been wanting to explore. It promised spectacular views of Mt. Baker. I was feeling sad at my loss as I trudged up some grueling switchbacks through the forest. I kept expecting to pop out onto a ridge but the trail continued upward wearing me out until soon my physical strength was about as low as my spirit. I decided that if it didn’t level out in the next five minutes I was turning around and going home. Just then I turned a corner expecting another upward path through the trees to meet my gaze when instead a glorious view of the mountain presented itself. It was so unexpected that it took my breath away. I sat down on a rock, tears flowing, gave God praise. I didn’t say “glory” but I felt it. It was as if at that moment my grief began to be healed. I knew God was in the heavens and all was right with my dad. That is what it is to feel the glory we hope will come as we pray each week.

Unfortunately, we too often take a functional view of religion. We do this or that, and God responds as we hope God will. Then we give thanks and glorify the God who delivers. This is the religion of Baal. You don't get rain unless I get an offering. If you offer and there is still no rain then you didn't do the right kind or the right amount of offering. Appease me and you get what you want. This is, as I said still the view of many about religion. I go to church so therefore God must bless me. Or if you give generously God will return it four fold we hear. Or we hear God wants to bless you but.... and you can fill in the blank. The implication is that God won't or can't bless you until you do something. I could go on but you get the idea. This is often what is hawked as religion but it is not what the Psalm is about and it is now what the prayer is about.

The Psalm says respect God's sovereignty. God will send the rain in God's time. The Bible even says the rain comes on the just and the unjust. God is not controlled and manipulated by us. We can't force God to do anything that God does not want to do. But it doesn't always happen according to our schedule and our desires. We have to learn to trust that God is with us, cares about us, loves us and will be with us, in good times and bad. And, if we look for it and expect it we will catch glimpses of God's glory and can add our voices to the angels and say glory.

In closing let me share a favorite story of mine told by Fred Craddock. He had been invited to give a lecture at the University of Winnipeg in early October. He gave the first lecture on Friday night and as they left it was beginning to spit a little snow. His host was surprised because he had written, "It's too early for the cold weather, but you might bring a little windbreaker." The next morning when he got up, two or three feet of snow pressed against the door. The phone rang, and my host said, "We are all surprised by this. In fact, I can't come and get you to take you to any breakfast, the lecture this morning has been cancelled, and the airport is closed. If you can make your way down the block and around the corner, there is a little bus depot and it has a café. I am sorry." He put on that light jacket and a cap and went outside, shivering. The wind was cold, the snow was deep. He slid and bumped and finally made it around the corner to the bus station. Every stranded traveler in western Canada was in there, strangers to each other pressing and pushing and loud.

Hear what happened next as told by Craddock. I finally found a place to sit, and after a lengthy time a man in a greasy apron came over and said, "What'll you have?" I said, "May I see a menu?" He said, "What do you want a menu for. We have soup." I said, "What kind of soup do you have?" He said, "Soup. You want some soup?" I said, "That was what I was going to order—soup." He brought the soup, and I put the spoon to it—Yuck! It was the awfulest. It was kind of gray looking; it was so bad I couldn't eat it but I sat there and put my hands about it. It was warm and so I sat there with my head down bemoaning and beweeeping my outcast state with the horrible soup. But it was warm so I clutched it and stayed bent over my soup stove.

The door opened again. The wind was icy, and somebody yelled, "Close the door!" In came this woman clutching her little coat. She found a place, not far from me. The greasy apron came, "What do you want?" She said, "Glass of water." He brought a glass of water, took out his tablet and said, "Now what are you going to order." She said, "Just the water." He said, "You have to order, lady," "Well I just want a glass of water." "Look I have customers that pay—what do you think this is, a church or something? Now what do you want?" She said, "Just a glass of water and some time to get warm" "Look, there are people that are paying here. If you are not going to order, you have to leave." And he got real loud about it. So she got up to leave and almost as if rehearsed everybody in that little café stood up and started toward the door. The man in the greasy apron said, "All right all right, she can stay." Everybody sat down and he even brought her a bowl of soup.

I said to the person sitting there by me, I said, "Who is she?" He said, "I never saw her before." The place grew quiet, but I heard the sipping of that awful soup and the smile on her face. "I am going to try that soup again" I thought. I put my spoon to the soup—you know it was not bad soup. Everybody was eating the soup. I started eating the soup. It was pretty good soup. All of it had change because a moment of Glory had transfixed them all.

May the Glory of God be with you this day and always.