

Above All

Psalm 29

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The full, wet droplet splattered on my arm, cooling my warm skin. Summer rains were welcome at Heartland Presbyterian camp, tucked away in nature just outside Kansas City, Missouri. Everyone was hot and sweaty from a full day running, playing, horseback riding and swimming outside. But as I felt a second rain drop on my head and looked above to see dark, billowing clouds gathering I began to get concerned...the campers had just begun their evening activities and were spread out all over the grounds. After those first few rain drops fell, more came, faster and faster until we became drenched in an unrelenting downpour. Campers and counselors alike began to run to the safety, creating chaos. The heavens were opening up above us, and we were scared.

The voice of the LORD spoke through the thunder, sending chills up and down my spine. As a response to the lightening-the sudden burst of light in the dark- the loud rumble of thunder rung in my ears.

The God of glory thunders...the voice of the LORD is powerful.

As the rain came down in sheets, it became more and more difficult to see, the wind whipping the tree branches and the grass becoming soaked with water. And then, suddenly lightening illuminated the sky again—this time right in front of me—

The voice of the LORD flashes forth flames of fire.

and then unmistakable sound of wood splitting.

The voice of the LORD breaks the cedars.

The large branch fell at my feet, along with a powerline, stopping me dead in my tracks. Grateful that powerline had not fallen on top of me, Awed by the power of the storm swirling all around me and frightened by it too.

Never before had I been so vulnerable in the midst of a storm. Never before had I been so profoundly aware of my smallness within God's majestic creation; humbled by my little place in its order.

Such humility must have been more common in ancient times. They did not have a weather app on their non-existent smart phones to tell them when a storm was brewing.

Nor did they have the science to explain what causes weather. They had only their experiences of being drenched by the rain sheets; blown away by the gusts of wind; forced to move after the flood. From these, folks in Biblical times came to know that a higher power within creation

was undeniable and unparalleled. In Psalm 29, the Psalmist declares God to be that power...Yahweh is above all other gods- even Baal, the Canaanite god known as the “cloud-rider, the lord of the storm, the one who brought rain and made the crops grow.” (McCann) The Psalmist pushes against a common trait in ancient writing, which was to assert one people’s favored deity over other gods or goddesses and he uses the same strategy in commanding *all* of the gods to worship the LORD.

He begins his psalm:

Ascribe to the Lord, O heavenly beings, ascribe to the Lord glory and strength!

Acknowledge the Lord, you gods and sons of gods- acknowledge the Lord as one of glory and strength, the Psalmist commands. Make no mistake, the LORD is above you- the LORD is above all.

Following his command to acknowledge the LORD, the Psalmist illustrates the LORD’s unique and supreme power with the metaphor of a terrific storm...an intense storm...a destructive storm. His descriptions are so vivid that we, the modern reader, aware of the human consequences of such weather, quickly become uncomfortable.

Uncomfortable worshipping a God who breaks the cedars, flashes forth flames of fire, shakes the wilderness, causes oaks to whirl and strips the forest bare...uncomfortable worshipping one who causes deadly fires, earthquakes, tornadoes and tsunamis.

It is that uncomfortableness that keeps us from seeing the incredible insight this Psalm offers us about God’s awesome power. This psalm is not about God’s destructive powers on humanity, it is about God’s sovereignty over the earth. This psalm reveals to us the incredible totality of God’s power in our world. (Howard)

The voice of the LORD controls that which is not controllable. The psalm demonstrates this by the actions of the voice but also by the repetition of the phrase “the voice of the LORD.”

The voice of the Lord is the agent of action seven times in our 11 verse psalm....seven is one of those important numbers in the Bible... The number seven is a number of completeness, as in the creation week in Genesis-on the seventh day God rested- or the number of divine perfection. The Bible is replete with the number seven. One article reported that it is found over 490 times (Wellman). Here the number denotes God’s COMPLETE power and sovereignty. There can be no other gods; no other claims of power.

Yahweh, the God of each of us and all of us, is also the God of all of nature, and God IS all powerful.

Since its summit erupted on May 17, Mt. Kilauea’s flowing lava on Hawaii’s Big Island has destroyed the state’s largest freshwater lake, covered significant parts of nearby subdivisions and has extended new land nearly a mile into the sea. In the face of such power, humans are called to humility, a cosmic humility that Richard Bauckham, Anglican Scholar and Cambridge professor believes is essential for us to have. He writes:

*Cosmic humility is a much-needed ecological virtue. We need the humility to recognize that our place in the world is a limited one. We need the humility to walk more lightly upon the Earth, with more regard for the life around us....We need the humility to know ourselves as creatures within creation, not gods over creation, the humility of knowing that only God is God. (deClasse-Walford).*

Those in the ancient world had cosmic humility. Living in a time before scientific discovery...a time before we could explain how thunder and lightning are created...a time before technology ruled our lives...a time before humans could comfortably choose independence from others, and even from God...to those in the psalmist's time, this hymn provided a definitive answer to the question: Who is Above all others? Who is above Baal and all of the other gods? Who is Sovereign over the world? The LORD. The LORD, the God worthy of our glory and worship. The God who gives us life, strength and peace.

In our twenty first century context, this God is easily ignored. There are so many other gods- lowercase g- that give us life, strength and peace!

First there is technology- we are all reachable at any moment thanks to our phones- providing a sense of peace, if not also burden. Then there is the stock market. A good close, like that on Friday, gives both peace and life, a greater sense of financial security. And then there are our individual capabilities...our own ingenuity and hard work that have enabled us to enjoy a privileged life. We recognize the crucial role these things have in our well being...but, other than in this worship on Sunday mornings, do we recognize and celebrate God as the ONE who gives life and all that sustains it?

Do we recognize that God is Above all or do we stop at giving thanks for all of the above things that make our lives rich and comfortable and good?

Lora and Cecil Ward recognize God is above all. I met Lora Tuesday evening during the ASP trip. I was standing at one the main hallway of the headstart center in Verda, Kentucky-fresh from a shower sporting my black Walmart shorts and an old t-shirt and she was at the other end. She was looking for the ASP staffers to drop off her neighbor's application to receive help, but the staffers were nowhere to be found. Before I had said much more than hello to Lora she began to tell me all about her life. She began by sharing about her involvement in getting ASP in Harlan County and preparing the head start building for the program. Hours spent on her hands and knees cleaning floors!

Then Lora began to talk about her family. She told the story of the incredibly tragic car accident that took the life of her 21 year old son eight years ago and she talked about the many family deaths, including her parents, that followed her son's, and she then talked about her husband's cancer. As I looked into her eyes as she talked my heart grew heavier and heavier. Yet, I did see light in her eyes, a twinkle of hope, a glimmer of joy. As she revealed more and more about the losses she'd endured Lora also revealed her faith. Her deep, abiding trust in God, the LORD who did not cause the hardships but gave her strength through them. The One who is Above all. The One who sustained her and gave her eyes that twinkle and joy.

Her husband Cecil models this faith for Lora. He is bedridden, in a hospital bed in their home, his body riddled with cancer. He's gone to the doctor just once, to receive confirmation of the cancer, but wants nothing to do with treatment options. God will heal me, he says to Lora. Now Lora, who doesn't want to lose her life companion, has pushed back against his reluctance to treatment- to which he responds, calmly and firmly- "Lora, God WILL heal me, whether to be with you or to be with him. Either way it will be good. God WILL heal me."

In his weakness, God has gifted Cecil with strength and peace; such strength and peace that only the ONE Above all can offer. Strength and peace given in spite of the surrounding sorrow, pain and uncertainty. Sustaining strength and peace.

Strength beyond all understanding sustained the employees and journalists of the Capital Gazette in Annapolis, Maryland to enable them to publish their paper on Friday, as they grieved the death of 5 of their own, murdered in the Gazette building on Thursday. Killer Jarrod Ramos reminded them all, and us alike, that in the most precious things of life- life itself- we can depend not on ourselves, not on any person. Any security we have in life is found in God. As The Presbyterian Church's Brief Statement of Faith begins, "In life and in death, we belong to God."

We belong to God, and God is dependable.

As Christians we recognize this dependability in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God who accompanied us in our struggle to heal our brokenness. We experience God's dependability through the mystery and marvel of the Holy Spirit, God always among us, working to make all things new. In just a few moments we will receive a meal that reminds us of this dependability; that fills us up to live, and opens our eyes to recognize God among us. In our weakness we are made strong, through God. We are mindful of whom we belong to, and are brought closer to God and to one another. The mystery of this holy meal is also found in the mystery- the glory- of God's nature and its movements.

It is through nature that we can see God clearly, as St. Paul wrote to the Romans: Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. (1:20) Invisible though God is, we are given the beauty and power of creation to see God, and also bread and cup—visible signs of God's invisible grace to experience God within us. Friends, with joy let us experience God, God above all else- in this time of worship and every day in our world. Let us be humble to know ourselves as creatures within creation, not gods over creation, may we know that only God is God and let us recognize, declare as the Psalmist did so long ago, that God is Above all. Thanks be to God, and glory forever. Amen.

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