

“The Life of Trust”

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- ¹ *Ascribe to the LORD, O heavenly beings, ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.*
- ² *Ascribe to the LORD the glory of his name; worship the LORD in holy splendor.*
- ³ *The voice of the LORD is over the waters; the God of glory thunders, the LORD, over mighty waters.*
- ⁴ *The voice of the LORD is powerful; the voice of the LORD is full of majesty.*
- ⁵ *The voice of the LORD breaks the cedars; the LORD breaks the cedars of Lebanon.*
- ⁶ *He makes Lebanon skip like a calf, and Sirion like a young wild ox.*
- ⁷ *The voice of the LORD flashes forth flames of fire.*
- ⁸ *The voice of the LORD shakes the wilderness; the LORD shakes the wilderness of Kadesh.*
- ⁹ *The voice of the LORD causes the oaks to whirl, and strips the forest bare;
and in his temple all say, “Glory!”*
- ¹⁰ *The LORD sits enthroned over the flood; the LORD sits enthroned as king forever.*
- ¹¹ *May the LORD give strength to his people! May the LORD bless his people with peace! (Psalm 29)*

The structure of this ancient hymn, believed by some to be among the oldest of the psalms, follows the basic shape of worship. The first two verses welcome us into the temple of God and bid us to bow down before the Lord: *“Ascribe to the Lord... ascribe to the Lord glory and strength, the glory of his name... worship the Lord in holy splendor.”*

The last two verses utter a parting prayer to the sovereign God on the throne: *“May the LORD give strength to his people! May the LORD bless his people with peace!”*

And in the center, between the Call to Worship and the closing Benediction, is the Word of the Lord – or, more particularly, “the voice of the Lord.” Seven times we are told what the voice of the Lord does – it thunders... it roars... it breaks trees like twigs... it flashes forth flames of fire... it shakes the wilderness. Seven times we are reminded that the same God who took seven days to create the cosmos in the beginning still reigns high above the length and breadth of that cosmos. Seven verses, seven repetitions, seven examples of God’s power – the psalmist is leaving no chance that the point will be missed. Seven, the most perfect number, the biblical signal for completeness and perfection, gives perfect shape to the perfect reminder for us on Trinity Sunday – a reminder to us -- and everyone else -- of exactly who is in charge. And all in God’s temple say “Glory!”

In a way, the psalm dovetails nicely with the earlier passage from Matthew, where the Son of God proves his own power over the storm. Here too, the voice of God commands the winds and reigns supreme over the waters. At the same time, the psalm seems scarier to me for one key reason. In the gospel story, Jesus is literally in the same boat with the fearful disciples. He is in danger, too, but his voice is strong enough to save them all. In the psalm, however, the voice of God is not stopping the storm. It is starting the storm, fueling the storm, directing the storm. In the psalm, it is not at all clear that God’s voice will save us. On the contrary, we are left to think that, if God can snap cedars like twigs and whirl oaks around like kindling and make Mount Lebanon and Mount Sirion bounce around like bucking calves, then just imagine what God could do to us.

All of this stormy drama highlights the complicated meaning of the word “fear” in the life of faith. The primary meaning of the phrase “fear of the Lord,” which is used no less than 27 times in the Bible, is a sense of reverence, wonder, and awe. To fear the Lord is to



offer up the profound respect due to the God whose voice created the world and reigns supreme over it. But we can never fully remove from this phrase the presence of good old fashioned fear – the trembling realization that a human being who gets anywhere near the supreme power of God is completely defenseless and vulnerable, and if that power is somehow directed against us, then we would be in real, real trouble. It’s why Moses had to take shelter in the cleft of the rock when the glory of the Lord passed by, because no one could see the face of God and live.¹ It’s why Isaiah, when God appeared before the prophet in a cloud of smoke, fell to the ground in terror. As the thresholds shook around him, he shouted out “*Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!*”² Human beings can’t stand before the power and purity of God – it is not a safe place to be.

Anyone who has ever tried to hold onto faith for any length of time knows that living into faith is a lot like searching for safety in a place that we sense is not truly safe.... like needing to trust someone we are not sure we can fully trust... like trying to muster courage when we cannot deny that we are deathly afraid. That’s why something that Nelson Mandela once said serves as a great reminder to me of what faith is all about. After the torrential storm that Mandela weathered in South Africa – after he survived a trial that most of us could never have survived – he looked back over it all. “I learned,” he said, “that courage was not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it. The brave man is not he who does not feel afraid, but he who conquers that fear.”³

I think the same can be said of faith. Faith is not the absence of fear. The faithful person is not the one who does not feel afraid, but the one who overcomes that fear. The power of God is a fearsome thing – but we also know that we need that power if we are to have any chance of overcoming the storms of our lives. Maybe this is why some people claim that Psalm 29 is not really about a storm at all. They say that what Psalm 29 is really about is “***a life of trust***” – trust that the voice of God is every bit as powerful as we need it to be.

Pastor and professor Will Willimon tells a story about a Sunday School lesson he once taught on the story of Abraham and Isaac, when God tells Abraham that he must sacrifice his only son. It is another place where scripture frightens us with the power that God wields over us. He chose to introduce the story with a video, and he found a good one. Abraham was played by the Israeli actor Topol, famous for his role in “Fiddler on the Roof.” In the climactic scene, as Abraham raises the blade to strike the fatal blow, the young Isaac’s eyes flash with genuine horror... only to be saved by the booming voice of the Lord, which out of the swirling clouds calls off the slaughter at the last possible second.

At the conclusion, Willimon flipped the lights on and looked out at the class, and he thought “What in the world have I done?” Mothers were crying. Men were pale and sweating. The room was completely freaked out by one question that everyone was struggling to answer: “What kind of God would toy with us like that?”

He could think of nothing but to fall on every teacher’s last resort. “Well, what does this story say to us?” The room was completely quiet for what seemed like forever. And then a middle-aged man popped up at the back of the room. “I’ll tell you what it means to

¹ Exodus 33:20-23.

² Isaiah 6:1-5.

³ <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/5156-i-learned-that-courage-was-not-the-absence-of-fear>

me,” he said. “When I look at that God, the God of Abraham, I feel I’m near a real God -- not the sort of dignified, businesslike, Rotary Club god we chatter about here on Sunday mornings. Abraham’s God could blow a man to bits, give and then take a child, ask for everything from a person and then want more. ***I want to know that God.***”⁴

That is the life of trust. That is the life of faith – faith that does not ignore that the power of God is to be feared, but still knows that we need to approach that power with courage and trust. The life of trust dares to draw near so that we can hear the voice of God, even if we know that voice could snap us like tree trunks, or blow us down a mountainside, or bring swirling flood waters over our heads. It is the kind of life that wants God to have that power, because only a God with that kind of power can have a chance against the storm.

And, even here in Psalm 29, we sense that the God who can create all of this power will not use it against us. Just as Abraham didn’t really have to kill his son, just as Jesus had no intention of letting his friends drown in the Sea of Galilee, we hear that the booming voice of God is not ***in*** the storm. Instead, in verse 3, the *voice of the Lord is **over** the waters.*” Likewise, in verse 10, “*The Lord sits enthroned **over** the flood.*” No matter how frightening the storm may seem to us, no matter how threatening it all seems to us as we sit naked and vulnerable before the awesome power of God... God is not directing the storm against us. Instead, God reigns above it. The voice of the Lord is over the storm... beyond the storm... greater than the storm.⁵

So, even this frightening scene guides us to the life of trust. It even invites us to hope that some of this power might even be given to us. That is where the act of worship ends – with a prayerful hope -- “*May the LORD give strength to his people! May the LORD bless his people with peace!*” In other words, “I see what your voice can do, God. So, bring everything you’ve got, because we really need your help. Our world is a mess. People we love are sick and dying. Conflict is raging in our country and in our communities. It seems that ethics are going out the window. Values that we once took for granted are abandoned with hardly a thought. What we really need is a God who is above it all – a God whose voice can be heard above the chaos, whose Word is strong enough to reclaim the world and put it back in line.”

In the 14th century, as the Great Plague descended upon Europe, the Christian mystic Julian of Norwich became desperately ill. She was so sick that the priest was called to administer the last rites to her. After that, over the course of an afternoon, Julian experienced a series of powerful visions. In one of these, she specifically remembers hearing the voice of God. It was as clear as if God was hovering right above her, speaking directly into her ear. Knowing what the prophets Moses and Isaiah said, it must have been terrifying to be that close to the glory of God. But in that moment, Julian felt only courage and trust, and she dared to ask God the question she had always wanted to ask.

“Why Lord,” she asked, must people suffer? Why do bad things happen to people who love you? Why is life so full of storms that inflict so much pain?”

The answer came immediately, but she noticed the voice had changed. It was no longer the booming voice of the Lord that snaps trees and burns forests and moves mountains. When the answer came, it was the voice of Jesus. This warm, gentle, loving voice did not

⁴ Willimon, William H. “On a Wild and Windy Mountain.” *Pulpit Resource*. June 26, 2011.

⁵ <http://biblehub.com/hebrew/5921.htm>

answer her theological question. He did not say why storms and suffering exist. Instead, the answer of Jesus moved over the storm... above it... beyond it.

"All shall be well," the voice of God said to her. *"All shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well."*

I don't know about you, but I want to know that God. I want to live that kind of life – a life of trust that recognizes the awesome power of the voice of the Lord, but still dares to draw near to it because we know it is the voice of the One who will lead us home.

May the Lord give that kind of strength to his people, in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, ***Amen.***