

The Voice of the Lord
Rev. Nicole Farley
First Presbyterian Church of Waukesha
May 31, 2015

Psalm 29

¹ Ascribe to the Lord, O heavenly beings,
ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.

² Ascribe to the Lord the glory of God's 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 God 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 God's temple all say, 'Glory!'

¹⁰ The Lord sits enthroned over the flood;
the Lord sits enthroned as sovereign for ever.

¹¹ May the Lord give strength to God's people!
May the Lord bless God's people with peace!

Pray with me: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, Our Rock and Our Redeemer. Amen.

What we read this morning is a play-by-play of a thunderstorm, maybe one which develops into a tornado, coming in off the Mediterranean. Israel is in a location which can provide, and has provided, the three components needed for a tornado to form: warm, moist air close to the ground; atmospheric instability; and clashing air fronts which propel moist air upwards.¹ We know, living in the United States where geographic conditions are most ideal for setting up tornadic systems, of the ease with which tornadoes break oaks, strip trees, and produce flashes of fire in lightning strikes.

¹ <http://www.livescience.com/45546-how-do-tornadoes-form.html>

In our psalm, all of these extraordinarily powerful natural acts are attributed to God. Before we even know about the storm, the foundation is laid: “ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.” It is a signal that whatever follows should be credited to God. It is a warning not to wrongly give, or take, credit which belongs to God alone. We open with God’s all-powerfulness and we close the same way: “the Lord sits enthroned as sovereign for ever.” Knowing that human history is overflowing with one power overthrowing another, over and over, we are reminded that God will never be overthrown, for God is more powerful than any.

God’s power at the root of this storm which lifts and drops, lifts and drops Lebanon and Sirion is troubling, is it not? In the wake of the storms which have flooded Houston, the earthquake which has shaken the Nepalese people, the tornadoes, the hurricanes, what do we say if we credit God for the power behind these storms? Can we separate the power of the storm from the supposed purpose of the storm? I don’t have an answer to this. I don’t believe that a God who operates out of love for the created world is anything like the neighbor Sid in the *Toy Story* movie, who breaks things and stomps on them and blows them up because he can. But I can’t explain away the power of storms if I believe God’s power is that great, and even greater – which I do believe.

Instead, I settle into my discomfort with the words of Evelyn Underhill, a noted Anglican writer who, in the last century, wrote, “If God were small enough to be understood, He would not be big enough to be worshipped.” Amen to that. This tension is part of our faith and part of our hymnody. From one verse to the next in *God of the Sparrow*, we sing, “God of the sparrow / God of the whale / God of the swirling stars / How does the creature say Awe / How does the creature say Praise // God of the earthquake / God of the storm / God of the trumpet blast / How does the creature cry Woe / How does the creature cry Save.” We say, with the psalmist, “The voice of the Lord is powerful; the voice of the Lord is full of majesty.”

The psalmist says, too, that the voice of the Lord is over the waters, breaks the cedars, flashes forth flames of fire, shakes the wilderness, causes the oaks to whirl, and strips the forest bare. Seven times we hear “the voice of the Lord.” Pastor Robert Warden Prim writes, “The sevenfold repetition of this phrase, ‘The voice of the Lord,’ may symbolize completion (as in the days of creation). It is also a poetic way of declaring God’s control over everything and everyone.”² Indeed, we cannot disconnect this psalm from the creation stories of Genesis, especially as we read Genesis 1, which is intertwined with John 1. “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.” “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was

² *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 3*, p. 35.

in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.” God speaks AND God is that which is spoken AND God is the action in the wind / breath / Spirit. What God does and who God is and how God acts are inseparable. This is perhaps one of the biggest mysteries we take on faith, alongside Jesus being 100% human and 100% divine. The voice of the Lord **is** the Lord. Verse three of our psalm says, “The voice of the Lord is over the waters; the God of glory thunders, the Lord, over mighty waters.” The voice of the Lord is the Lord.

What God does and who God is and how God acts all center around life. The psalm affirms this, promotes this, proclaims this. (BBC TV) Producer Iwan Russell-Jones writes, “This is a psalm soaked in the life-giving paradox of the biblical revelation of God – a God who Christians believe must be understood in Trinitarian terms. It speaks of a being so majestic and transcendent that all creatures in all places are called upon to cry, “Glory!,” yet whose mighty power is also directed towards sustaining, affirming, and blessing human life.”³ It is this mighty power which the psalmist entreats God to share, saying, “May the Lord give strength to God’s people! May the Lord bless God’s people with peace!”

With peace. The Hebrew word is *shalom*. The latest Marvel Avengers’ movie⁴ is steeped in the rhetoric of our faith from “upon this rock I will build my church” to a reference to Noah and the flood to a saving character who, when asked if he is on the side of good or evil, states that he is on the side of life and then says “I am” and seems to trail off, leaving it as a definitive statement. The antagonist, Ultron, as in any Marvel storyline, is not simply evil and, as such, serves as a truth-teller amidst the chaos he brings. Our heroes have expressed a wish for “peace in our time” but Ultron challenges them, saying, “You want to protect the world, but you don’t want it to change.”⁵ This is obviously not a direct biblical quote as the others are but this defining of peace is certainly rooted in *shalom*.

Shalom is not calm. *Shalom* is not a lack of chaos. *Shalom* is far more radical than that; *shalom* is an instigator of change. *Shalom* demands equity and justice for all. To bear the *shalom* God can provide, people indeed need God’s strength. To actively be part of God’s *shalom*, people need God’s strength, a strength as mighty as the strength which whirls the oaks, flashes forth flames of fire, shakes the wilderness. If we join the psalmist in calling upon God’s strength, beware, for to protect the world means to change the world. And so we pray, “May the Lord give strength to God’s people!” Amen.

³ *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 3*, p. 34.

⁴ A review worth reading can be found at <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/watchinggod/2015/05/age-of-ultron-may-be-the-most-spiritual-superhero-movie-yet/>

⁵ <http://www.imdb.com/character/ch0020753/quotes>