

In Praise of Glory

(Psalm 29 / Matthew 3:13-17)

Sermon delivered by The Very Rev. Matt Rhodes at Christ Church, Millwood, Virginia
First Sunday after the Epiphany, January 12, 2020

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you O Lord,
our creator, our sustainer and our redeemer. Amen.

יְעַז כְּבוֹד, לַיהוָה הָבוּ; אֱלִים בְּנֵי, לַיהוָה הָבוּ. לְדָוִד, מְזִמּוֹר.
קִדְשׁ-בְּהַדְרַת, לַיהוָה הַשְׁתַּחֲוּוּ; שְׁמוֹ כְבוֹד, לַיהוָה הָבוּ.

*Havu l'Adonai, bey-neh eleem
Havu l'Adonai, ka-vod veh ohz
Havu l'Adonai, keh-vod shemo
Hish-tach-avu l'Adonai beh ad-rat kodesh.*

*Grant to the Lord, O sons of God,
grant to the Lord glory and strength!
Grant to the Lord His name's glory.
Bow to the Lord in holy majesty!¹*

In reading Psalm 29 earlier this week – both the version heard earlier and the translation by scholar Robert Alter that I just quoted – I was struck by its cadence ... its repetition ... its ***momentum***. In fact, the more I read it the more I could imagine hearing the voices of preachers who use a rhythmic, driving style in their sermons. I could hear their voices proclaiming the repeating phrases woven throughout the psalm ... voices growing more and more ***intense*** and ***impassioned*** ... voices moving their congregations further and further along in a growing wave rolling toward some end they can't yet see.

Admittedly, one voice I seemed to hear was that of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. I could hear his emphasis and passion. I could hear him using his voice to grab hold of the listener and carry them along on the journey. I even found myself imagining that I was alongside all those who heard his words, leaping to my feet and shouting ***Amen!***

Don't worry; I'm not going to try and replicate a King-style sermon this morning. What I would like to do, though, is draw your attention to the rhythm, drive and imagery of this psalm. You likely noticed words and phrases that are used again and again: "ascribe to the Lord" and "glory" and "the voice of the Lord." This is referred to as a *pattern of incremental repetition*, something that aside from what it adds to the psalm also indicates the age of this song (and that's what psalms are: songs). This pattern is "a device favored in the oldest stratum of biblical

¹ Robert Alter. *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary: Vol. 3, The Writings*. Psalm 29:1-2, pp. 81-2.

poetry (as, notably, in the Song of Deborah, which might date back as far as 1100 B.C.E.).”² So it’s conceivable that the words we together just spoke are ones that could be more than 3,000 years old!

Beyond ***what*** it says about the age of the psalm, however, I feel that the repetitive nature and drive of the language is important for ***how*** it reflects the message being conveyed by the psalmist. This is a song of ***praise*** and ***celebration!*** It is a song that has an introduction, a set of verses and a coda ... an arrangement that gives us ***what*** we are praising and ***why*** we are celebrating. Those speaking are giving thanks for the ***power of God***, reflected in the use of the word *thunder* (which is often used to portray divine power or revelation³) and that in the regular, repetitive phrase “the voice of the Lord” rolls like that same thunder across the land.

Even in the severe, chaotic imagery found in the heart of the psalm – flames of fire, the shaking wilderness, whirling oaks, forests stripped bare, the remembrance of the Flood – ***God is present***. This is the only place in the entire Old Testament “in which the glory of the Lord is so extensively ... manifested ... in natural phenomena.”⁴ The psalmist says the voice of God is the acting force behind each of these natural occurrences ... and then we are reminded that God is enthroned ***above all of it***. God is among the events of this life ... in the heart of ***everything*** that takes place ... but remains ***greater than them all***. God “rules over the powers of nature as well as ruling in the human realm.”⁵

Apart from the chaotic and confusing noise of the world ... apart from the cacophony caused by those engaged in argument and disagreement ... apart from the voices of those crying out in despair, is the voice of God. The powerful, majestic voice of the one seated enthroned as a king is speaking ***to us***. In the context of this psalm, nothing is asked of us. There are no demands. It is simply a reminder – a reminder that God is ***glory*** ... God is ***supreme*** ... God is ***mighty***.

On this day on which we recall Jesus’ baptism by John, there is still another reminder for us. The God of the Psalms is the God of the baptism. The God of the Old Testament is the God of the New. “The same God who broke the cedars of Lebanon also ripped the skies open. The same God who shook the wilderness sent the Spirit as a winged courier to the Jordan.”⁶ In the words of Karl Barth, “The one, omnipresent God remains the One He is. This is His constancy.”⁷ God may appear to ***change his mind***, but God ***never changes***.

The voice of the God who speaks ***to us*** in the psalm ... and the voice of the God who spoke on the day of Jesus’ baptism, who said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased”⁸ – can be the voice that speaks ***through us***. ***We*** are the people blessed by God with peace ... and ***we*** can be the people to take that blessing and share it with others. ***We*** have

² Alter, footnote 2, p. 82.

³ Walter Brueggemann and William H. Bellinger, Jr. *Psalms*, p. 147.

⁴ James L. Mays. *Psalms*, p. 29.

⁵ Brueggemann and Bellinger, p. 148.

⁶ Maryann McKibben Dana, “Psalm 29: Pastoral Perspective.” *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Vol. 1*, p. 224.

⁷ Karl Barth. *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of God, I.2*, p. 491.

⁸ Matthew 3:17 (NRSV).

heard in the psalm of God's glory and strength, and we can be the reflection of that strength to others around us. We have witnessed God's hand at work in the world, and we can act likewise and be God's hands working for others. To return to a phrase used earlier, we can be the pattern of incremental repetition in the world ... the rhythmic, driving reminder of God.

*Grant to the Lord, O sons of God,
grant to the Lord glory and strength!
Grant to the Lord His name's glory.
Bow to the Lord in holy majesty!*

Amen.