

“Awe, Wonder . . . & Peace”
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The psalmists were on to something. They knew that repetition could be used to great purpose. Did you catch the sevenfold repetition in today’s Psalm? All throughout verses 3-9, we hear, again and again, “The voice of ADONAI.” Now, we are more accustomed to hearing, “The voice of the Lord.” But the word, Adonai, is a reminder to us Western Christians that our English translations miss a bit of the way the Hebrew word was conveying the power and holiness of God. You see, the English word, Lord, used here, is a translation of the Hebrew word YHWH, which was the most holy name for God. To preserve its sacredness, when the Hebrew people read or sang the word, they would substitute for it instead, the word, Adonai. The Lukan Psalter, whose translation we used this morning, brings to our awareness, the repetition of this most holy and sacred name for God throughout the Psalm.

As you learned from our psalmist, Richard Colligan in his explanation and then song interpretation of Psalm 29, the repetition of this phrase, “the voice of Adonai” is meant to remind the people of the holiness, the power, the glory, the majesty, and yes, even the danger, of God. What did the images in the video and the music of his song, evoke for you? Do you sense the awe, the mystery, the wonder in the song and the images chosen to accompany it?

We’ve just made it through the Christmas season. We came and adored Christ the Lord, the newborn babe and king. Today, we hold that together with a sense of the awesome majesty of the God whose mighty voice “breaks the cedars . . . shakes the wilderness . . . causes the oaks to whirls, and strips the forest bare.” If you imagine, in your mind’s eye, the most awesome experiences you have had out in nature—maybe hiking in the mountains, getting caught somewhere in a storm or surveying the intense damage after a particularly strong storm, maybe watching the mighty crashing ocean waves or tracking the path of lightening in the night sky. Whatever you imagine, know that all of those sights and experiences are opportunities to catch a theophany—an appearance of God to us humans. Have you ever stopped and considered these powerful, sometimes frightening, and always majestic acts of nature, as God making an appearance to you? And, moreover, do these sights and experiences draw you, in awe and wonder, into greater worship of holy God?

Writer Annie Dillard challenges Christians on just this point. She warns, “The churches are like children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies’ straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews.”

Dillard's words may be shocking or even a little offensive to you, but she is aiming to capture the prophetic warning in this Psalm not to domesticate and trivialize the God of glory. Not only would it be entirely appropriate to go out into a storm and worship the power and holiness of God, but it would also be wise to remember that God's voice, God's Word, has power to accomplish all that God intends, though not in the ways we might have imagined.

Psalm 29 is a bold declaration that the sovereign Lord of creation speaks not only through the "still, small voice," but also "thunders . . . over mighty waters." I wonder if we might sometimes become overly accustomed to listening only for God's still, small voice to us. Psalm 29 offers a bit of a reset button for us to zoom the camera lens out and see the cosmic reign of God in and through the natural world. In the midst of the mystery and awe that this conjures for us, it also powerfully communicates that God's voice is indeed heard in all things, including the powerful and frightening storms of life.

For this psalmist, the image of a thunderstorm was the most vivid way to capture the powers that threaten human life. What image or images would play a similar role in our time? A category-five hurricane? A tsunami? An earthquake along the San Andreas fault? A virus wreaking global devastation.

Whatever image we might choose, the conclusion of the Psalm offers us this assurance. Whatever the power and forces at work in our world that threaten human life, God, ADONAI, sits enthroned over them. They are not over and above God. God is not serving and responding to them. God is in all the storms of our lives. And God reigns sovereign over them. Nothing is too much for God. We may find ourselves terrified, or broken, or grieving deeply, but God is not overwhelmed and unable to help, nor is God absent. Rather, God is there in them with us, and God cannot be shaken.

None of us is a stranger to the thunderstorms that shake the foundations of our lives and blow away our illusions of security. Many of us have had several major storms this past year and we are all still in the eye of the pandemic storm. But over against all that shakes us to the core, all that threatens to wash away the very foundations of life, the psalmist concludes by ascribing glory to the God who has power to the people with peace. The psalmist invites us to trust the God of shalom peace is alone ADONAI Lord over all the forces that threaten to blow us away.

This God is the same one who has declared, "I have called you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you. . . . Do not fear, for I am with you" (Isa. 43:1-2, 5). In the midst of the chaos of these days, we have an opportunity to experience the power and presence of the One whom the voice of God would acknowledge in the waters of Jordan, "This is my Son, the Beloved." Amid the storms of life, we too are invited to ask and exclaim with Jesus' storm-tossed disciples, "Who is this that even wind and sea obey?"

The hope of this Psalm is that God will channel the great power imagined in it toward granting shalom, peace, to the faith community. The hope is that YHWH ADONAI will bring order to both creation and to life. May it be so!

In closing, allow me to share one more modern interpretation of today's psalm, this time from Rev. Katie Mulligan, a PC(USA) pastor:

Over the murmur of the stream,
Over the crashing of the ocean,
Over the shattered scatter of the rain,
Over the stillness of the morning lake before the wind: the wind, the Spirit.
Over the rushing of blood through my body,
Thudding my head, breaking my heart, aching my feet:
The voice of the Lord over the waters, stirring up trouble, calling my name.

I hold my hands over my ears,
I play music to drown the voice,
I shut the doors and windows on the hottest day,
I crawl under the blanket and curl into myself,
And still the voice of the Lord calls over the waters,
Whispering to my trembling, hidden self, a shivering lump wrapped in my grandmother's quilt.
They say, "Come child, let us play."

From under the quilt I worship the Lord in holy splendor.
They have given me strength!
They have blessed me with Peace!
Glory!¹

¹ "The Voice," by Katie Mulligan, in *The Words of Her Mouth: Psalms for the Struggle*, edited by Martha Spong (The Pilgrim Press: 2020), 29.