

Bravo God! Bravo!

Psalm 29

It was a 6 hour drive across the desert, not a blade of grass to be seen. The temperature on the car dashboard said 104F. We were hot and tired. Somewhere around the four hour mark, I had this little niggling thought. “What if...it’s not as impressive as they said. What if it’s disappointing?” I mean, not only will I be disappointed after having wanted to see the Grand Canyon since my best friend, Heather, travelled there with her family when we were 5 years old and I spent hours pouring over the scrapbooks her mother made, drinking in every delicious detail. That’s several decades of expectation building, I won’t tell you how many. And not only would I be disappointed but now I have dragged Kirk and Lily thousands of miles from home, across a desert full of nothing in this heat - how frustrated would they be? I shoved those worries down deep where no one else could see them. Two hours later, we grabbed a quick lunch and checked into our hotel room before making our way along the path toward the South Rim of the Canyon. I could feel my heart pounding hard with nervous anticipation, those niggling worries making their way back up from my stomach into my throat as we walked, a walk that took much longer than we imagined. And no sooner had Kirk said, “Where is this thing?” than there it was. And the tears streamed down my face. It was amazing, greater than any of my expectations, of all my expectations and I was overwhelmed: not overwhelmed by the immensity and grandeur of the canyon itself but by the glory of the God who designed it. Bravo God! Bravo!

Psalm 29 is an enthronement song, a song you would sing while you are standing in the throne room, bowing before the presence of a king or queen. It shares that category with Psalms 93 through 99. These are all psalms which enthrone God. Or in other words, these Psalms unapologetically proclaim that God is the King of kings and Lord of lords. David wrote Psalm 29 as a hymn for worship; a hymn which would be sung by those gathered at the temple. And as they sang, as they proclaimed the power and glory of God, they enthroned Him once again. And so it is a hymn, to which worshippers easily lend their voices. But Psalm 29 is more than just a hymn for worship. It is declaratory – it states a claim not only about who God is for us but who God is for all.

Bravo God! Bravo! It was an involuntary exclamation of praise that couldn’t be suppressed. It was a visceral reaction to the experience, a jumping to one’s feet with applause, and shouts of “Yes! God!” It’s the way David begins Psalm 29, in the version we read this morning from the Message. Bravo God! Bravo! The NIV and NRSV put it much more formally: “Ascribe to the Lord, you heavenly beings, ascribe to the Lord glory and strength. Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name.” I had to look up the meaning of ascribe to make sure I had the sense of the sentiment right. It means to give credit, to acknowledge the source or the author. This Psalm of David is more than simply an exclamation of wow. But it is a bold declaration of the glory and power of God. It is a statement acknowledging God for who He is, Creator, yes, but more. Because David doesn’t just

begin and conclude with this Bravo. But take a closer look at who David is addressing. Gods and all angels shout “Encore!” David is commanding the heavenly realm, all the small g gods, all those who think they are gods, and the companies of angels, commanding them to acknowledge God, admit that Yahweh, Israel’s God, Yahweh alone is the God of all the power, the God of all the glory. It is a declaration we repeat as we gather each Sunday for worship. Did you know that you said it this morning? Do we ever stop our thoughtless repetition to consider what we are saying? It is a declaration embraced by Jesus as he taught his disciples how to pray, the declaration which forms the conclusion of that prayer: for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory.ⁱ This is the way David begins Psalm 29. Let there be no confusion in heaven or on earth. The kingdom, the power, the glory, they belong to you God, you and you alone.

What a way to begin. But the psalm does not end there. David goes on to skillfully illustrate the power of God in seven dramatic scenes, each one building on the other. Biblical scholar, James Mays writes that the illustration of power “takes its shape in the form of a thunderstorm, that forms over the sea and comes crashing against the coastal mountains and their forests and shakes the wilderness beyond. And it reaches its climax in a declaration that the Lord is enthroned over the flood as king forever.”ⁱⁱ The psalm, Mays reminds us, is not about a thunderstorm. Don’t get stuck there. Our contemporary minds limit the perception of thunder to merely meteorological terms but here we are introduced to a theological dimension.ⁱⁱⁱ David simply uses the image of a thunderstorm to help us imagine or capture a sense of the awesome and terrifying power of God. The psalm, this song is about God. God is where David begins. God thunders across the waters – and for an instant we catch a glimpse – “Brilliant, his voice and face, streaming brightness!” Reading Psalm 29 from the Message helps us to keep the focus on God. Eugene Petersen orients the verses in such a way that they begin with God and not simply with the imagery of the storm. Because he recognizes that it is easy for us to get caught up in the thunderstorm and lose focus. David is a skilled song writer. In our ears and in our minds, we get the sense of the storm building: thunder getting louder as it comes closer and closer, the ground shaking, the lightning flashing, the wind swirling, trees bending, the rain pelting, the water rising. But the storm is only a metaphor. And we realize that when we arrive at the end of verse 9 where he writes: We fall to our knees and we call out “Glory!” Humanity does not fall to its knees and bow before a storm. Often storms bring us to our knees with cries of desperation, with cries of “why me?” cries of anger or frustration. But rarely if ever do the storms cause us to bow low and cry “Glory!” God is not the storm. The storm is not God. Don’t confuse the two. David uses the imagery of the storm to help us understand the strength and power of God.

As I read this, I can’t help but think of the story found in Matthew’s gospel of Jesus and his disciples crossing the Sea of Galilee in a boat. A storm blew up on the lake and the waves began to break over the side of the boat. And Jesus was sleeping in the boat. The disciples woke him in a panic shouting, “Lord, Save us! We’re going to drown!” And after telling the disciples to calm down, Jesus, told the wind and the waves the same. Calm down. Be still. That story is not about the storm. That story is about the Lord of the storm. It is a story about the power and glory of Jesus. He lifts his voice to proclaim his power over the storm. And I that

moment, the disciples catch a flash of His glory.

In verse 10 of Psalm 29, the scene shifts. The raging storm, humanity humbled in the presence of such power, and then we are given a glimpse of the view from above the earth – the universe, the place beyond mere mortals. We are back to where the Psalm began. This is where God is enthroned; from where His power flows, from where He rules the world. God reigns. There is a sense of calm, of peace, of security. God reigns. But which God? We live in a world with so many gods competing for our worship. There are the usual lineup of gods named and worshipped by other world religions, the gods whose names and images are creeping into our language and on our bookshelves and in our gardens. But there are other gods, more carefully disguised, more insidious. They are sitting in our purses or in our back pockets sold to us as tools to make our lives better but we have become slaves to them. Or a thin piece of plastic which enables us to fill the empty places of our lives with as much stuff as we can cram in. Do you want to know what one of the fastest growing business sectors in North America is right now? Storage facilities. They cannot build them fast enough. Last year a friend posted on facebook that he was looking to put some things in storage while they were moving and there was no storage space to be found within a three hour radius of his home not far from here. What God is on our throne?

Earlier this week, Kirk and I watched a live Q&A with Rev. Will Willimon, Professor of The Practice of Christian Ministry at Duke University and a Bishop of the United Methodist Church speaking on the subject Can Canadian Christians Evangelize? Willimon shared why he strongly believes that the reason evangelism in Canada is so vital is that finding ourselves in 2018 living in a secular society, the real question for our friends and neighbors is not “will I be converted to worship some God? [But] which God will have its way with me?” Which God will have its way with me? Which God will reign over me? Which God will I enthrone? Just a few days ago I read with acute sadness in the Sept 2016 issue of the National Geographic an article about the Grand Canyon that raised concerns about a planned development to build a tramway to the bottom of the canyon and build a retail complex and food court along the banks of the Colorado River. A mall in the middle of the Grand Canyon. Of course, conservationists and environmentalists are concerned about the impact that the development itself and the wear and tear that the estimated 10,000 consumers per day will have on the Canyon. But my concern is for a generation who will prostrate themselves at the doors of another mall or gorge themselves in the food court and completely miss the opportunity to experience the glory of God in that place.

Despite all of this, David writes, God is on His throne and He reigns. It is a word that reorients our world. When we become aware that God is on the throne, we find strength and peace. No longer are we the ones responsible to keeping the world spinning on its axis. God has this. It’s not about us. It is not about us. Though we find ourselves often at the centre of the storm, in a world filled with tension, uncertainty, polarizing forces, forces that threaten to overthrow us or overwhelm us, a world in which lesser gods vie for our attention and adoration, God is still on His throne and He reigns. This psalm of David points ahead to the prophet Isaiah who also lived in turbulent times. He was a prophet, God’s spokesperson regarding God’s people being taken into captivity. When Isaiah was called to be God’s prophet, he had an incredible experience of God. Of it he wrote:

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne; and the train of his robe filled the temple. ² Above him were seraphim, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. ³ And they were calling to one another: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.” ⁴ At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke.” The whole earth is filled with His glory.

When we came to the end of the path and came upon the expanse of the Grand Canyon, I cried. I cried, not because I crossed the number one item off my Bucket List after so many years of hoping one day to see it. It wasn't about me or my bucket list. I didn't cry because I saw the Grand Canyon and it was not disappointing. It wasn't about the Grand Canyon. I cried because at the Grand Canyon I saw God and He was greater than all my expectations. And there I joined my voice with Isaiah and David, singing together: Bravo, God! Bravo!

ⁱ Nancy deClaisse-Walford, http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3130

ⁱⁱ James Luther Mays, Psalms. Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, 2011.

ⁱⁱⁱ Clinton McCann, http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2453