

GOD'S MANY VOICES IN THE NATURAL WORLD

PSALM 29

Ascribe to the Lord glory and splendor. Why? Because God is blessing us again! As the Spirit gathers us to worship as Christ's body on this Trinity Sunday, More Light Presbyterians throughout the nation are celebrating God's call to all creation, and we, as a people of faith, have much to celebrate if we use all of the senses that God has given to us to taste, touch, hear, smell and see that the Lord is good.

The Psalms are among the most in-your-face writings in the Hebrew canon, and I give thanks for their intensity of expression. The pages of the Psalms are punctuated by joy, laughter and tears. God speaks, and psalmists listen (even when they are not so sure that God is listening to them).

Prepare yourself for what will be the summer of Psalms at University Presbyterian Church. Starting today, we will be reading the Psalms responsively during the Service of the Word, and the Word proclaimed will come primarily from the Psalms.

I promise to delve deeply and be creative in my renderings of the Psalms. For example, the paragraph that I just read is structured similarly to Psalm 29. It begins with an imperative and includes repetition---parallelism---and concludes on a note of proclamation. Prepare yourself for...the Service of the Word, the Word proclaimed. Ascribe to the Lord...ascribe to the Lord...the voice of the Lord...the voice of the Lord...the voice of the Lord...may the Lord give strength to God's people...may the Lord bless the people with peace.

In preparation for a presbytery retreat this past week, I had to write an essay on spiritual leadership formation. What is spiritual leadership? How is it formed? Every time such questions are asked, I return to Marjorie Thompson's *Soul Feast*, which is a book that has been taught here in years past. The book advertises itself as "an invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life." Suggestion: there is only

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one spiritual life to which we all belong. It also emphasizes spiritual discipline---not bringing charges against those who are guilty of violating *The Book of Order*---but exercising faith by practicing spiritual reading, prayer, worship, fasting, hospitality, etc.

Think of everywhere that the Psalms fit this discussion. As Scripture, the Psalms may be read, rehearsed and/or recited for spiritual formation. The Psalms may be prayed, and in so praying, we are as joyful, light, bold or fearful as the Hebrew hymns. The Psalms are featured prominently in Jewish and Christian liturgies. There is a yearning in many of them that reminds us of hunger and thirst and motivates us to bake and serve bread for the world.

Roman Catholic activist monk Thomas Merton waxes eloquently on this subject in his book *Praying the Psalms* which begins: "Why has the Church always considered the Psalms her most perfect book of prayer?" His tentative judgment is that, "The Church indeed likes what is old, not because it is old but rather because it is 'young.' In the Psalms, we drink divine praise at its pure and stainless source, in all its primitive sincerity and perfection." Later, Merton sharpens his response to the initial question by saying, "The reason why the Church loves the Psalms...is not merely that they have been sent...by God from...far-distant heaven, but because God...(is given to)...the church...in them, as though in a Sacrament."

It saddens, disappoints and disturbs me that Trinity Sunday does not seem to be emphasized in the church as much as it used to be. I remember being at a gathering soon after Trinity Sunday last year in which more than one person bragged that he bypassed the subject of the Trinity on Trinity Sunday in an effort to give the congregation something that they could use (and yes, they were all men, go figure...).

Hmm...is that what worship is, something that we use? Obviously, it is for some, but isn't worship supposed to be about God? This Psalm was written to help people of faith to ascribe glory to

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God. Worship is not disposable. It should not be wasted. Great is the mystery of faith! Trinity Sunday calls us to proclaim this boldly. Otherwise, we have some explaining to do.

Psalm 29 is commonly interpreted as a creation Psalm. About creation Psalms, German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer says, "The Scripture proclaims God to be the Creator of heaven and earth. Many Psalms summon us to bring...(God)...honor, praise and thanksgiving. There is, however, no single Psalm which speaks only of the creation. It is always the God...(who has already been revealed to God's people in the Word)...who is said to be known as the Creator of the world. Because God has spoken to us, because God's name has been revealed to us, we can believe...(in God)...as the Creator."

God has many voices in the natural world: "The voice of the Lord is over the waters; the glory of God thunders...the voice of the Lord is powerful...full of majesty...the voice of the Lord breaks cedars...and...flashes forth flames of fire...the voice of the Lord shakes the wilderness...causes oaks to whirl, and strips the forest." The Spirit of Pentecost is still with us. Do you feel its mighty wind?

The retreat in which I participated this weekend was for the faculty of presbytery's Institute for Spiritual Leadership Formation, which will begin this fall. We met on a wooded property by a creek (that seemed wide and busy enough to be a river, but I was told not to question this assumption). I had this bright idea to camp rather than to stay in the cabin. Only one other faculty member was willing to stay with me. The only bad decision that we made was to wait until after dark to pitch the tent, but that is another story.

The weather cooperated. It was not remotely balmy. In fact, there was a gentle breeze. What I remember most fondly is listening to the stream. It did not even make me want to go to the bathroom. All it did was help me to relax, to meditate briefly on this Psalm and to give thanks for the many voices of God in the natural world.

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That night, we ate dinner and drank wine. We shared stories with different accents. We spoke from our experiences, and suddenly, we were working together better than ever (maybe because we had stopped trying so hard, maybe because our defenses were down), and I am convinced that the church will be stronger for it.

Now that is a group that is willing to embrace the mystery of faith. In this setting, it was so clear to me that God is revealed in the natural world. There is beauty in dirt, the same dirt out of which humans beings (even Jesus Christ) were created. The breath that was breathed into him is breathed into the church by the Spirit. I am at a loss to explain how it works logistically, but the more places I see God's grace reflected in the world, the clearer my vision of God becomes.

And this is why I give thanks for you (at least this Sunday...next Sunday, I may give thanks for you for another reason). The ignorance in the church regarding gays and lesbians is astonishing. Even among those who are for changing ordination standards, there does not seem to be a vast body of experience with being in ministry with men and women who are open and honest about their homosexuality. I know this, because before God called me here, I did not have a vast body of experience with being in ministry with men and women who were open and honest about who God created them to be sexually and who God created them to love. The GLBT persons that I knew before I came to Tuscaloosa, for the most part, had had enough of the church and/or did not feel that they would be welcomed there, which is bad for the church, because by excluding others for any reason limits our ability to appreciate the many voices of God.

Then there are the critics within the church who would rather church doors be bolted and particular members be asked to sit at the back of the turtle-topped bus parked in back of the church. Just this past week (or maybe the week before), a person bragged to me that college with which he was once affiliated expelled a student for being gay.

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The funny thing was that he assumed that I would agree with him, and I didn't. He argued that homosexuality is a sin, and I said, "only if God created you heterosexual." I went on to suggest that if God created a person homosexual who insisted on being heterosexual, then that person is committing a sin, because sin is about being something other than what God creates a person to be, and to live in this state of existence would be hell on earth, and I associate hell with sin. At last, he said, "Well, it's just not natural," and I said, "but it is." To suggest otherwise is to limit God. Resurrection is unnatural, and yet we believe that through Christ all things are possible.

Now let me say this about my experience of this More Light congregation: your sexuality, at least as far as I am concerned, is among the least interesting facts about you. The longer that I am here, the more I think of you as incredibly gifted and loving people who often work too hard and overextend yourselves. If you are in a committed relationship, I think of you as two first names, and I give thanks for love that exists between you. Notice that nowhere in this paragraph do I differentiate between straight, lesbian, gay or bisexual. Relationships are relationships. They exist among human beings who reflect the beauty of the world that God created.

We are a More Light congregation within the PC(USA), and yet first and foremost, we are part of the body of Christ, a body that we remember being broken and lifted up. We are baptized into one faith. We drink of one cup. When God gathers us at the Lord's Table, I marvel at the experiences represented there. Sometimes I feel like laughing. Sometimes I feel like crying. Always I give thanks for Jesus Christ and for a church family that encourages me to sing and to pray. Communion is a Psalm-like experience through which we ascribe glory to the Lord. O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are God's judgments and how inscrutable God's ways! For from God and through God and to God are all things. To God be glory forever. Amen.

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