

Elizabeth Presbyterian Church
May 16, 2010
Dr. Bruce A. Spear
“God’s Hand in the World”
Psalm 97

Prayer of Confession – from Henri Nouwen

“Loving Savior, in your wounds and suffering, you showed us a love stronger than death. So quiet my anxiety, Lord Jesus, and give me the grace to open my heart to you. Give me your compassion for others. Let me willingly take up the burden of another person’s grief and pain. Help me to love unconditionally, to give without expecting a return. Teach me to know your heart and to show that love to the world.”

Psalm 97

1. The Lord is king! Let the earth rejoice;
let the many coastlands be glad!
2. Clouds and thick darkness are all around him;
righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne.
3. Fire goes before him,
and consumes his adversaries on every side.
4. His lightnings light up the world;
the earth sees and trembles.
5. The mountains melt like wax before the Lord,
before the Lord of all the earth.
6. The heavens proclaim his righteousness;
and all the peoples behold his glory.
7. All worshipers of images are put to shame,
those who make their boast in worthless idols;
all gods bow down before him.
8. Zion hears and is glad,
and the towns of Judah rejoice,
because of your judgments, O God.
9. For you, O Lord, are most high over all the earth;
you are exalted far above all gods.
10. The Lord loves those who hate evil;
he guards the lives of his faithful;
he rescues them from the hand of the wicked.
11. Light dawns for the righteous,
and joy for the upright in heart.
12. Rejoice in the Lord, O you righteous,
and give thanks to his holy name!

We are looking at Psalm 97 today. This psalm can be summed up in two words, “God Reigns.” We live in a society and world which has all but forgotten about God. We have explanations for everything that happens and an “Act of God” has become a phrase that we only hear from an insurance adjuster. But Psalm 97 tells us that God is alive and well and that he currently is reigning over the world.

The psalmist opens the psalm with a description of God’s power as seen in the lightning and fire of a volcano. We have just witnessed such a volcano in Iceland which shut down air travel in Europe so severely that even the president of the United States could not travel to participate in the funeral of the Polish leader who died in a plane crash. Let’s look at some of the pictures of the volcano and match them with some of the words in the psalm.

Now it is common for modern people to say that a volcano has nothing to do with God. It is simply the shifting of tectonic plates that allows molten lava to break through to the surface of the earth and create steam, dust, and electrical displays that have nothing to do with a supposed deity in heaven. That kind of explanation is called scientific reductionism. As Marcia Riggs has written, “To appreciate the power of the poetic language

of the Psalms, we need to suspend our dependence on the notions of the scientific, compartmentalization, a sovereign self, liberal democracy, psychology, and general values; we would instead embrace metaphor, unity, a sovereign God, monarchy, human trust, and good and evil, righteousness and wickedness.”

We can contrast these two ways of looking at the world and human society by creating a chart like the one on the screen:

Scientific Reductionism	Scriptural Metaphor
Compartmentalization	Unity of the Universe
A Sovereign Self	A Sovereign God
Liberal Democracy	Divine Monarchy
Psychology	Human Trust
Socially Acceptable Values; Moral Relativism.	Right and Wrong; Righteousness and Wickedness.

If there is no God then everything around us is reduced to chemical reactions and the ever changing laws of physics. So we compartmentalize our lives by having a faith in God that satisfies our insecurities but has nothing to do with the real world. In fact, we learn that it is not God who is in charge but we who are in charge. We need to accept our own sovereignty and self-sufficiency according to some forms of modern psychology. There is no right or wrong, everything is relative. So there is no righteousness or wickedness only an understanding of social convention and how well we adapt to our environment.

But if we take the Bible seriously as a revelation from God, we see a far different picture. We see a God who created and sustains the universe by the word of his power. We see a divine monarchy rather than a universal democracy. The ten commandments cannot be changed even by a two thirds or even a 100% majority. We find ourselves accountable to God for the way we live and the way we treat one another.

As J. Clinton McCann, Jr. writes:

“God’s will for the right ordering of human society is embodied in the very structure of the cosmos... Thus people who live by God’s rule instead of by self-will are at one with the universe as God intends it.”

God is not a figment of our imagination and his will for the world and its inhabitants is not a matter of personal opinion. God also, has not abandoned the world to its own devices and chaos, but has sent his son Jesus Christ to show the earth’s inhabitants the way to live, to pray, and to serve others.

From Jesus we learn the second theme of the psalm. Not only does God reign but his agenda is justice and righteousness. Verse 2 declares that righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne. Now when a Hebrew writer puts two words together like this, he is generally using them as synonyms. This helps us understand the meaning of both. You can’t be righteous if you aren’t just. Justice has to do with how we treat our fellow human beings. Jesus showed by his life and ministry that we are to treat our fellow human beings with kindness and compassion. He told the story about a Pharisee and a scribe or a theologian who walked by an injured man on the desolate road to Jericho. They may have thought they were righteous and just, but their failure to respond with compassion and mercy to the man’s injuries showed that they were neither righteous nor just.

The psalmist contrasts those who act with justice and righteousness toward others with those who worship idols. He is saying that idolatry gets in the way of compassion and mercy. Is that true today?

Perhaps our greatest idolatry in America is our love of the Almighty Dollar. If we are always measuring everything we do by the bottom line of how it will affect our bank account, then Jesus says we are serving mammon and not the kingdom of God.

If we can’t fit the support of a third world child into our budget then maybe we ought to check the status of idolatry in our lives.

I always hesitate to say something like this because the people who can fit a Compassion child into their budget often think I am talking about someone else. And the person whose house was just foreclosed and is desperate for any source of income is the one who steps up to the table and promises to support a Compassion child. So as Jesus said, “Let him who has ears to hear, hear.”

The larger point is that God cares about people like 5 year old Evelin in El Salvador. She lives in a shack like the one our students built outside the church. She lives there because her home was destroyed in an earthquake nine years ago. Her family still hasn’t recovered enough to build a new home. They live on the small salary of her dad who is an automotive mechanic’s apprentice. I can tell you from personal experience

that all he is allowed to do is clean dirt and grease off of engine parts so the mechanics can put them back together.

Their shack doesn't even keep them dry from the rain and they don't have clean drinking water. So Evelin's mother was overjoyed when Evelin was sponsored by an American lady named Amy in Florida. She says, "I thanked God. I felt very happy when I realized that someone was interested in helping and loving my daughter." That is how God reigns in Evelin's life. The world is not out of control. God is working to restore justice and righteousness.

That brings us to the third theme of the psalm which is that God's reign is personal. It is personal for Evelin, but it is also personal for us. God is aware of all that is going on in our lives and is with us regardless of what we are going through.

As William Self writes:

"God usually approaches us indirectly. Most of us are very familiar with cloudy days. We need to listen for and to the voice of God, most particularly on cloudy days. We must stay the course and believe that on a cloudy day you *can* see forever and experience God's presence and support."

I have been commuting five days a week to Elizabeth which is about an hour each way. I have taken the opportunity to listen to all my sports talk show hosts like Bob Golic, Jim Rome, Alfred Williams, Scott Hastings, but right now is the deadest part of the sports year. I think college ping pong just had its national championship.

So after a while I succumbed to researching the habits of other commuters, the ones who cut in front of me to exit from the passing lane, the ones who pull out in front of me at 25 mph on a 55 mph road, the ones who haven't learned that the little stalk on the left side of the steering wheel is a unique device designed to let others know when you plan to make a right or left turn.

Finally, I decided I just needed to listen to books on tape, people like CS Lewis and Richard Foster. Now instead of arriving in Elizabeth depressed about the Broncos or angry with other commuters, I arrive pretty much at peace and in the strength of the Lord, because I am reminded that God reigns.

As Patricia Farris writes:

"Sometimes, in the midst of sorrow or simply the emptiness of feeling bored and listless, a good dose of the energy of God's power and might proves to be healing and rejuvenating."

I had a chance to meet Don Reiverts, the friend of one of our members, Don Siecke, this week. Don Rieverts was reflecting to me on the things he had done in his life and said the highest privilege in life is to be used by God to be a blessing in someone's life. He said there is nothing as exciting as seeing what God is doing and getting involved.

Because God reigns, we can invest our lives in the lives of other people. According to Patricia Farris, "The medieval Jewish scholar and rabbi Maimonides taught that the individual's decision has the capacity to tip the scale of the world toward life. In the worldview of Psalm 97, even while God's lightning lights up the whole sky, the one lighted candle held by one faithful soul has the power to make all the difference in the world – however much the hand that holds it may tremble."

Benediction

May the peace of the Lord Christ go with you,
wherever He may send you.

May He guide you through the wilderness,
protect you through the storm.

May He bring you back rejoicing
at the wonders He has shown you.

May He bring you back rejoicing
once again into our doors.