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What Does a Hurricane Teach Us About God?

a sermon on Psalm 29

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Are you afraid of thunderstorms? Martin Luther, who began the Protestant Reformation, was. According to legend, he got caught in a violent thunderstorm one day. He became so frightened that he promised God he would become a monk if God rescued him from the storm. Thus began his career in the church. God has strange ways of calling people sometimes.

I have had the opposite experience. I can recall thunderstorms that delighted me as a child. I would sit at the big front window waiting for a clap of thunder to shake the window panes. The flashes of intense light and the percussion of thunder excited me. It was a religious experience too. The storm spoke to me, in a strange way, of the power of God. I didn't think God was in the storm. Rather, the storm gave me a sense of scale. The storm was bigger and stronger than I, and I knew God was bigger and stronger than the storm. The storm helped me feel what standing face to face with such awesome power might be like. It did not teach me how big God is, but it taught me what it feels like to be in the presence of overwhelming power. I found comfort, not fear, in the experience.

The Bible on my desk adds a title to Psalm 29: "The Voice of God in a Great Storm." I am aware of the irony of preaching a passage with that title on the first Sunday of hurricane season. We do not want any great storms! Yet this is exactly why we need to hear Psalm 29. Life is full of unpredictable, potentially devastating events. Natural disasters, the economy, health problems—take your pick—and there are plenty more. Events are bigger than we are. God is bigger than any event. We need Psalm 29 to remind us of this basic truth, which it does with poetic beauty and force. Many people fear that our world, our country, and our society are falling apart. They may be right. If you are like me, you hear the news and you feel helpless to change things. That feeling is not entirely true, but obviously we are not in control. God is. People ask, "Where is God? Why doesn't he do something?" If you believe God only acts in ways we like, you haven't read the Bible. A God who loved his people enough to send them into exile because that was the only way to get them back on the right path is capable of letting us learn from our mistakes. Even in hard times then, we can be sure that God is there and he is in control. Psalm 29 says something we need to hear. We not only need to hear it, we need to take its message to heart. We can take it to heart by paying attention to its rich imagery drawn from nature.

If you want to hear what Psalm 29 is saying, you need to understand two things. One is why it was written. The other is how nature teaches us about God.

First, why was Psalm 29 written? Answer: To make the claim that Yahweh, the covenant God of Israel, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob rules. He is sovereign over all things. When this psalm was first sung, the choice people had to make was not “Is there a god or not?” That’s the religious question people in our time and place have to answer first, but not back then. For them the question was, “Who is the real God? Which god is really in control?” Ancient Israelites were a minority faith. Before long, we may know what that feels like. Those who worshipped the Lord were not a minority in their own towns and communities, but all around them were other people with other gods. The usual thing to do was incorporate your neighbors’ gods into your religious practice—the more the merrier. Israel could not do this however, just as Christians cannot today. What really matters in religion is truth and falsehood. God was very explicit with his people that they were not to follow other gods.

Scholars suspect Psalm 29 may be the oldest of the psalms. It comes from the time when Baal was the chief rival to Yahweh. You may recall how King Ahab married a foreign princess, Jezebel, who pushed the worship of Baal on the Israelites. Many Israelites began to worship Baal alongside Yahweh. You may also recall Elijah’s showdown with the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel. “The God who answers by fire, he is God!” Well, here is something you probably don’t know, but it helps make sense of Psalm 29: The Canaanites worshipped a god named Baal as the king of their various gods. He was the god of thunderstorms, and thunder was supposedly the voice of Baal. According to Canaanite myth, Baal won his kingship by defeating his archenemies, Sea and River.

Let’s look again at Psalm 29 with this in mind. Psalm 29 takes the image of a thunderstorm away from Baal, and uses it to praise Yahweh, the God of Israel. When verse 1 tells the heavenly beings to worship Yahweh, it probably does not mean what a modern Christian would naturally assume it means. We hear that and think of angels and God’s heavenly host—something like that. Originally it probably meant the gods of the other nations. Psalm 29 calls on all the various gods of the world to acknowledge the rule of the One True God.

Psalm 29 is a poem of 23 measures. Eighteen of them say the name Yahweh. In your Bible this shows up as the word *LORD*, with small caps. Whenever you see the word *LORD* like that, the Hebrew behind it is YHWH. This is the name of God, the name he revealed to Moses on Mt. Sinai. Most Jews, ancient and modern, consider the name of God too holy to be spoken, so instead of pronouncing it, they would read it as “the Lord.” And most English Bibles follow this practice.

So this psalm praises the Lord as the real God. It takes the image of the thunderstorm away from Baal, just to make the point stronger. And, to really rub Baal's nose in it, the psalm pictures the mighty waters as the willing servants of the Lord. The waters, which fought against Baal, become symbols of God's absolute sovereignty over all creation.

For the sake of thoroughness, let me explain one more thing about the background. I worry that when you read the Bible and you come across something you do not recognize, you just kind of go on, but you are left with the feeling that the Bible is obscure and too hard to understand. The truth is, the Bible is God's love letter to you. It tells you who God is and who you are. Yes, you may have to work a little to figure some things out, but the effort is worth it.

Look at verse 6: "He makes Lebanon skip like a calf and Sirion like a young wild ox." What's that about? Lebanon was the land just north of Israel. Sirion refers to Mt. Hermon in the anti-Lebanon mountain range. These two are named together because Hebrew poetry uses a lot of parallelism. Verse 6 means God's voice shakes the north. Now go down to verse 8: "The Lord shakes the wilderness of Kadesh." This is to the south of Israel. So Psalm 29 says the voice of the Lord shakes the land from the far north to the far south. Or we might say that when God speaks, the earth shakes from New York to Los Angeles. We are right back to what I said about scale at the beginning of the sermon. God is so big, his voice reverberates from one end of the land to the other. We cannot comprehend how big God is, but geography can give us a feeling of vastness. In ancient Israel, it took longer to get from Lebanon to Kadesh than it takes for us to fly around the world. Nevertheless, the size of the world, and for us the size of the cosmos, help us appreciate the power and glory of God.

Why was Psalm 29 written? To remind ancient Israelites – and us – that God reigns supreme and he has no rivals. He is worthy of our worship, and we can be glad because his desire is to give his people peace.

Second, how does nature teach us about God? Psalm 29 reminds me of what C.S. Lewis said about the love of nature in his book *The Four Loves*. Lewis said that nature does not teach us about God so much as it gives meaning to the words we have to use about God. He says it better than I. Let me read a short quote: "What nature-lovers ... get from nature is an iconography, a language of images. I do not mean simply visual images; it is the 'moods' or 'spirits' themselves ... that are the images. In them each man can clothe his own belief" [p. 19]. I get that because he is describing my experience with thunderstorms as a child. I learned from the Bible and church that there is One True God and that he is a God of power and glory. Nature didn't teach me that. No thunderstorm ever did. But because I already knew that, the thunderstorm taught me what an encounter with power and glory feels like. Lewis also wrote:

Many people – I myself am one – would never, but for what nature does to us, have had any content to put into the words we must use in confessing our faith. Nature never taught me that there exists a God of glory and of infinite majesty. I had to learn that in other ways. But nature gave the word *glory* a meaning for me. I still do not know where else I could have found one. I do not see how the “fear” of God could have ever meant to me anything but the lowest prudential efforts to be safe, if I had never seen certain ominous ravines and unapproachable crags. And if nature had never awakened certain longings in me, huge areas of what I can now mean by “love” of God would never, so far as I can see, have existed. [p. 20]

Nature helps us love and understand God by connecting our words – words like *love* and *glory* – with our experiences. They make these words come alive because they mean something to us at a very deep level.

This is why Psalm 29 can be deeply moving and teach us theology at the same time. We know what a storm feels like. Our modern scientific knowledge of weather does not change the feeling we get from a storm, whether it is fear or delight or both. In the same way, our scientific knowledge of water, sand, and ecosystems does not make the beach less enjoyable. The sand feels good (as long as you keep it out of your clothes!). And the water calms us. If anything, understanding these things better should cause us to appreciate them more. And give praise to their Creator.

Ancient Israel didn’t know what a hurricane is, fortunately for them. We do, and it is hard for me to read Psalm 29 without thinking of hurricanes. The size, the force, the power of the water – it’s all there in the psalm. What does a hurricane teach us about God? Nothing, according to C.S. Lewis, and I think he’s right. A hurricane may raise a lot of questions we want answered, questions like, “Why does God let things like this happen?” You get a sermon about that every time a big storm hits. But, by itself the hurricane does not teach us about God. What it does do for us, however, is give us a sense of scale. We know the power of a strong category 3 hurricane. We’ve seen the effects. Compared to the power of God, that is nothing. The most powerful hurricane is a weak and clumsy thing next to the awesome might and mysterious wisdom of God.

So what does Psalm 29 say to us today? Well, it does want to make sure we have the right God. That is its main concern. The God of Israel, the God who revealed himself most fully in Jesus Christ. The triune God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – this God and no other reigns supremely over all. Our lives and our future are in his hands. By his grace we live, and by his grace we are saved from condemnation for eternal life. His Word raises the dead and calls into being the things that do not exist. His voice is the one we must listen to.

Once we take that message to heart, Psalm 29 says something more: Do not be afraid. The very last word in Psalm 29 is *shalom*. *Shalom* means peace, but it is more than the absence of war or conflict. *Shalom* also includes well being, a situation in which everything is good and right. After the storm comes peace. God uses his power for this purpose, the peace of his people. Even in the midst of suffering and temptation, we know that things will be OK, because of Jesus. He died. He rose again. That's God's power. The power to suffer and forgive. The power of resurrection. His kingdom, God's ultimate shalom, will come. Until it does, we take comfort in God's power. We celebrate his reign.

The next time you witness a thunderstorm, think of Psalm 29. Let it remind you of God's power. When the thunder rumbles in the distance or explodes all around you, that's not the voice of God; but let it remind you that God speaks with authority. When a flash of lightning illuminates the darkness, that's not the light of Christ's presence; but let it remind you of his radiance. When you feel small and helpless, delight in being small and helpless in the strong hands of God. Ascribe to the Lord the glory of his name, and may he bless you with peace. Amen.

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