

Jan 21st 2024
Summerland United Church
God is Holding Your Life: *Psalm 29: Awe and Wonder*

Threshold

Strength and peace are the prayers of the Psalmist this week. The Psalmist calls us to acknowledge the strength of the Holy One.

With awe and wonder we behold the presence of God in all the elements of creation—water, fire, air, earth. And it is this glory that assures us that God, indeed, is holding our lives.

Reading: *Lukan Psalter translation*

Give glory to ADONAI, you heavenly court,
 give ADONAI glory and strength!
Give forth the glory that God's Name deserves,
and worship ADONAI in the splendor of holiness!

The voice of ADONAI resounds
 over the waters;
the God of glory thunders over the
 raging seas.
God's voice is powerful,
God's voice is full of majesty.

The voice of ADONAI snaps the cedars,
 shatters the cedars of Lebanon.
It makes Lebanon skip like a calf,
 and Sirion like a young wild ox.

The voice of ADONAI strikes with
 bolts of lightning;
the voice of YHWH shakes the wilderness,
 the wilderness of Kadesh.

The voice of God twists the oaks,
 and strips the forests bare;
and in God's Temple, all cry, "Glory!"

ADONAI sits in judgment over the flood;
 ADONAI is its Ruler forever.
Give strength to your people, ADONAI!
 Bless your people with peace!

The word of God for the people of God.
Thanks be to God

Reflection: Most of us, I think, grew up with a notion of body and soul, yes? This idea that they are somehow 2 separate things – one concrete and the other ineffable. Many believe that when the body, the concrete material object carrying around the soul ceases to exist – our true selves, our true nature, an immaterial, ethereal substance continues to live on in some way.

I'm not here to challenge that in anyway. Just comment on it. We get this notion from the ancient greeks who believed in Dualism – the material and the immaterial, the mundane and the spiritual. The earth bound and the divine. And for many ancient Greeks and for the cultures that evolved from them – we also got the notion that the material, mundane, earthbound aspects of humanity are subject to transgression, wickedness and yup, I'll say it sin. Our human bodies are inferior to the unknowable divine soul or spirit. The goal in life, therefore, must be to deny our human fallings and seek the perfection of ourselves and transcend our earthly bonds to something holy and pure. The soul must migrate out and beyond.

Some very bad theology has come out of these beliefs over the centuries. And I'm bringing it up because in Hebrew and Jewish theology – this dualism does not exist. And we are reading the Psalms, which are steeped in Hebrew and Jewish theology and we miss it, if we apply our own Greek-influenced theology and don't know Hebrew.

So a very quick crash course in the nature of the soul, from the Hebrew perspective. And here's where it gets interesting.

The Hebrew word for soul is – *nefesh* – which is also the word for throat. And they were not just referring to the body part – rather they were also referring to the action of the throat – it breaths, cries out, croaks, calls, thirsts, swallows nourishment and water – therefore the *nefesh*, the soul hungers and thirsts for life.

While Greek thought separates soul and body and encourages the migration of soul away from the body, in Hebrew though this is impossible.

The soul resides where all life enters the body, where the very aspects required for life connect – therefore when the breath stops so to does life.

Throat, breath, voice – is quintessential to what humans are and so this psalm praising Adonai's voice – praising the power of God's voice in the world – suddenly looks a little bit different. As to all the times we read about God's voice in the scriptures.

In Genesis – God speaks, and creation comes into being. Moses hears God's voice in a burning bush, on the mountaintop. Isaiah hears a voice calling in the wilderness, Elijah recognized God by a "still, small voice."

So we hear in this psalm the voice of God – the *nefesh* of God – the soul of God resounding over creation. And the writer of this psalm is overwhelmed by the majesty and power God's soul commands. All of creation is subject to God's soul, all of creation is connected to God's soul, so then we too are connected to the very essence of God.

Some scholars believe that Psalm 29 is one of the oldest pieces of writing in our scriptures. Some suggest it was originally a Canaanite hymn to the storm God Baal. Knowing this matters because it means it was written completely outside the concepts of Greek dualism – and we must read it with the more wholistic Hebrew concept of soul and body inseparable.

And the reason for this is present in the last stanza of the psalm.

The Psalmist writes Adonai sits in judgment, as ruler forever. The Hebrew word used to describe how God sits – is *yashab* – means to settle down and dwell amid people., but one who is with it. This is not a dualist God, far away and unreachable. But a God intricately interwoven with the mundane and earth-bound world.

Give strength to your people, ADONAI! The Psalmist calls out in the last stanza. And God can do this because God is there, present and connected, inseparable from all of creation including myself.

I know that the strength of God is also inseparable from me. It's there I have it – and how resounding, powerful and magnificent this strength is. It storms on the seas, it shatters and snaps cedars, it twists and strips forests bare... or rather it can. But it also bless the people with peace.

It can shout, but it can whisper. It can be a force to be reckoned with thundering from mountain tops, engulf desert bushes with flame, and it can be a still soft voice, filling a silence with a gentle presence just on the edge of notice.

What awe and wonder do we have before us when we see God not just in creation around us, but in the very breath that sustains us. When God is far away, transcendent and beyond our grasp, how can we be comforted? But when God is as close as our very breath and where God becomes intrinsic to our being we can know we are held, we are comforted, we are blessed with peace.

And while we might read this psalm and be overwhelmed and perhaps unnerved by the images of such destructive power, we really mustn't miss the implication the psalmist makes at the end of the psalm. God has all this power and might, strength and majesty, yet chooses to dwell amid the people. Holding their lives, holding our lives, blessing us with peace.

May it be so.

Selah

Time of Silence