

“What Does God Have to Say About It?” (9Jan22)
Psalm29; Luke3; Isaiah43:1-7

We weekly use four prescribed lectionary Bible readings in worship, one from a Gospel (this year mostly the Gospel of Luke), an Old Testament reading aligning with the Gospel’s theme, a Psalm that further echoes the Old Testament reading, and some bit from elsewhere in the New Testament, sometimes connected and sometimes floating on its own.

Of those, one seems special. Not the Gospel because we stand up for it and hear stories about Jesus. I mean the Psalm, the one and only all of us get to read aloud. We share in proclaiming Scripture to each other.

Well, as the lectionary had you proclaiming today, it struck me that this Psalm put strange words in your mouth. Not least, you started out by telling angels what to do (“All of you angels in heaven, honor the glory and power of the Lord!”). More than that were terms maybe unfamiliar on your lips, which you may or may not find unusual, on how relatable the Bible readings are.

You referenced Mount Lebanon and its cedars, Mount Hermon, and the desert near Kadesh. I suspect none of that geography is very well-known to you. You may recognize Lebanon but, like me until this week, probably didn’t know that the word Lebanon means “white” and probably refers to the snows on the Lebanon mountains, surrounding those famous luxurious cedar trees.

Again, you may know the name Hermon, but associate it more with PeeWee Herman or Herman Munster rather than a big Hermon Mountain, though it’s the highest in that region.

And Kadesh. Kadesh was actually the one that made me start to look it up this week. I had no idea what or where Kadesh was, so I suspected it may be foreign to you, too.

And foreign, actually, may have been part of the point of the Psalm. The mountains are up north, beyond the borders of the Holy Land. Kadesh was out in the desert to south, off from the wilderness

wanderings, so dry that God had to make it an oasis by Moses bringing water from a rock (Numb. 20). Just as the “raging sea” you mentioned in your reading was almost certainly the Mediterranean, off the west coast, these locations spread far surrounding the Holy Land.

Perhaps the voice of the LORD—so often repeated in this Psalm, echoing on and on, the voice of the LORD—isn’t sticking only to God’s home turf, the region where God’s people live, but is beyond borders, actively engaged far from the temple and the population centers, off out in strange places.

And, as you said, it’s a “mighty and marvelous voice.” What’s the voice or the LORD doing in the Psalm? Raging over the sea, flashing like lightning, roaring of thunder, tearing the bark off trees, shaking mountains, which are remarkably imagined to go bounding off like gawky-legged baby barn animals. We’ve unfortunately been familiarized with these scenarios, in tornadoes last month, and winds that peeled shingles off the roof of this very room and toppled trees through our neighborhood.

But to amplify instead the foreignness of this voice, I also learned this week* that this Psalm from our Bible was likely borrowed, originally a hymn to the Canaanite storm god Baal, reinterpreted away from Baal’s violent combativeness to our God being above the flood, controlling rather than exacerbating the chaos, bringing home the foreignness and leading to peace for the people.

The actions of this powerful voice that certainly could seem intimidating lead to peace. Again, part of the point of the Psalm seems to be to join our voices in awe and in hope, and maybe to attune us to the voice of the LORD.

An Old Testament professor of mine who died recently had written** that this Psalm always made him think of watching a storm come across a lake and brought to mind the hymn “How Great Thou Art”:

O Lord, my God, when I in awesome wonder consider all the works thy hands hath made, I see

* e.g. <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/reviced-common-lectionary/baptism-of-our-lord-3/commentary-on-psalm-29-19>

** James Limburg, *Psalms*, p92-93

the stars, I hear the mighty thunder, thy pow'r throughout the universe displayed; When through the woods and forest glades I wander, and look down from lofty mountain grandeur; Then sings my soul, my Savior-God, to thee: How great thou art! How great thou art! (ELW 856)

That may well fit how the voice of the LORD is portrayed in the Psalm. But wandering far from home, far afield, in foreign lands, through forest glades while waiting for cedar bark to be stripped bare is not the only place this voice of the LORD shows up.

So I'm eager to move on to the Jordan River, another borderland far from the central temple. If the Psalm happened to cover north and south and west, the river takes us to the eastern proximity of the Holy Land, where the voice of the LORD comes to Jesus at his baptism, not to shiver and shake the wilderness or skitter mountains, but with maybe—though simpler—an even more tremble-inducing announcement: “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

And if that seems powerful as it thundered from the sky, and maybe still seems foreign and far, far away and long ago, then we bring it home to your own baptism, where to you also the voice of the LORD has directly declared, “You are my Child. I love you. I am very pleased with you.”

In echoing expansion of that enduring promise that leads to peace, again hear the voice of the LORD as proclaimed for you this morning from Isaiah: “You are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you. Trials and trouble shall not overwhelm you. Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. I love you, and you are mine.”

Hymn: “You Are Mine” (ELW 581)