

Searched by the Psalms Series at Brentwood

January 10, 2009

The Voice of the Lord

**Ps 29 & Luke 3:15-17 & 21-22
(Hymns - 174, Ps29, 287, 736)**

The Psalms have always been especially revered
in Presbyterian circles.
When I was growing up in Drummond Hill Presbyterian Church
in Niagara Falls,
on the old, old Blue hymn book,
we sang a paraphrase of a psalm every Sunday.
We memorized them in Sunday School.
Along with some of the parables and a few sayings of Jesus,
they became for me the most familiar parts of the Bible.

Robert Davidson,
who taught Old Testament at the University of Glasgow,
caught some of the power and influence
of the Psalms when he quoted
an early church father, Theodore of Mopsuestia,
then added his own thoughts:

*“Of other Scriptures, most [people] know nothing.
But the Psalms are repeated in private homes,
in streets and in market places, by those who learn them
by heart and feel the soothing power of their divine melodies.”
This is hardly surprising since the Psalms
cover the whole gamut of human experience from praise to penitence,
from quietly confident faith to agonized perplexity,
from joy at the wonder of life in God’s world
to the struggle to reach out to a God
who seems remote or silent,
from bowing humbly before the mystery of life
to bitter and urgent questioning.
It is all there, and because it is all there
we are there in our ever changing moods and needs. (2)*

It is the way the rich expression and testimony of the Psalms
captures the full range of human experience
in our relationships with God
that led me to decide to focus our worship services

and my sermons for 2010 on the Psalms.
Each Sunday we will explore the witness
of the Psalm in the lectionary readings for that week.
I'm calling this series 'Searched by the Psalms'
because I think that's what a proper reading of the Scriptures does.
It is used by God, through the inner working of the Holy Spirit,
to search and challenge us,
to confront us,
with what it really means to live in relationship with Jesus Christ,
to get centred in Jesus Christ is worship and learning,
to enjoy community with Jesus Christ in fellowship, and
to experience the compassion of the Jesus Christ in service.

The faith of Jesus was deeply shaped by the Psalms.
He quotes them often, even on the cross at the moment of death.
They form the core of his devotion to the Father
and his faithful stand against the abuses
of religion and politics and economics in his day.
To be searched by the Psalms week after week
for the better part of a year
is a good way to develop within ourselves and among ourselves
the 'mind of Christ' that Paul wrote about in Philippians.

We begin our series with Psalm 29.
Students of this psalm
believe it is one of the earliest hymns
used by Jewish worshippers
in the temple in Jerusalem.
And it is important to remember this feature of the Psalms.
They were and are both the hymn book and prayer book
for the Jewish faith.
They take us to the heart of the experience of worship and devotion
in which Jesus himself was raised
and that guided Jesus in his work and witness.

Psalm 29 is generally regarded as an adaptation
of an ancient Canaanite hymn.
The Canaanites were the dominant political and religious power of their age.
They worshipped a number of gods,
the most powerful of whom was Baal, the god of storms.
In Psalm 29,
Baal has been replaced by Yahweh,
the God whom the Israelites and their heirs, the Christians,
understand to be the one true God.
This is a hymn of praise and devotion
to that God's power over all of creation,

God's glory and strength.

And that strength is pictured as a Voice.
It is not just the noise of the storm and the thunder,
full of fearsome majesty and glory.
Most importantly, it is a Voice
that blesses God's people with peace,
that gives God's people the strength of peace.
The most powerful force in the world,
the force that overcomes all others gods and forces,
the force that evokes and draws out our praise and worship,
is a Voice of peace.

This peace, this *shalom*,
as described elsewhere in the Scriptures,
is a full, satisfying, secure existence
in which people enjoy all the good things which enrich life,
free of evil in any form.
Peace is the gift of God's well-being for human beings,
a grace that encompasses every dimension of our existence –
physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual.
That is the purpose for which God uses his awesome power,
to give us peace.

What we do with that gift is the key issue.
The gift is here and real.
It took flesh in Jesus Christ
and continues to seek to shape our lives in the work of the Holy Spirit.
But we have to respond.
In spite of the awesome power of God,
capable of thunder through the storms and natural events,
God has chosen to speak and influence
in the quieter blessings of peace,
of well-being and kindness and mercy and grace.
God has chosen to model the way of peace in Jesus Christ,
praying, teaching, serving, challenging, and enjoying.

I have a good friend, Omowale Satterwhite,
with whom I serve on the Board of the Alliance for Nonprofit Management.
He was the founder and is now senior advisor
to the National Community Development Institute in Palo Alto, CA.
He signs all his e-mails with a quote from Alia Ahmed,
"Peace does not mean to be in a place
where there is no noise, trouble, or hard work.
It means to be in the midst of those things and still be calm in your heart."

How, then, do we acquire that sense of peace,
of confidence, calm, and well-being in our hearts?

Psalm 29 has some important lessons for us,
lessons that begin in the experience of the people of God in worship.

First, we are encouraged to recognize that this peace is a gift from God.

It is not ours to control or withhold.

It is God's and God has already given it to all humanity,
indeed, to all creation.

This gift of well-being is God's desire for the world.

If we feel drawn into devotion to this God,
then we will actively use and promote his gift of peace
as an expression of our gratitude.

Whatever we do to improve well-being on this earth,
within ourselves, within our families, in our neighbourhoods,
in our countries, in our global village,
we do in gratitude for the gift of peace
from the most powerful force in the world.

Second, we are encouraged to cultivate the impact and effect of that gift
within ourselves and among those we influence.

Our presence has an impact.

One way of thinking about this

is that we leave a wake,

just like a boat leaves a wake in the water.

Is the impact of that wake positive or negative?

Does it overwhelm people and leave them feeling swamped?

Or is it a refreshing wake that leaves good things behind
and increases well-being?

Developing the self-awareness to understand our impact
on those with whom we live and work and play
is important as we seek to live lives of peace.

That is why it is important to open ourselves
to being searched by the Psalms,
and other parts of the Scriptures,
as God continuously seeks to shape us to be
effective instruments of his peace.

Third, we are encouraged to invite others to enjoy and spread
the gift of God's peace and well-being.

The Psalms originated in public worship.

They were the public hymns of praise and prayers
of the people of Israel at worship,

approaching God, listening to God, and responding to God.

So, one of the best ways to share God's gift of peace
is to invite others to come and see what lies at its source,
to come and experience worship
as a source of peace and well-being in their lives.

That's the most effective way we can grow
in our work and witness here at Brentwood –
inviting others to connect with the source of peace we enjoy,
inviting others to be blessed by God with well-being.

We know that, in the final analysis,
churches grow because people invite other people to come.
85% of church growth happens that way.

Our responsibility is to extend the invitation.
It is the Holy Spirit who will take it from there
and convince the people to come.

But the Holy Spirit has little to work with
without the invitation.

We are called, then, to use God's gift of peace
to be a blessing to others,
to leave well-being in our wake.

The strength we can draw on to answer this call
is the strength of the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer of the universe.
In gratitude, we gather to worship and be nurtured by that strength
and we go out to serve and spread the impact of that strength.

Amen