

Searched by the Psalms

**Psalm 113 & Luke 6:1-13
(Hymns – 73,290,305, 340)**

September 19, 2010

What Is God Really Like?

This Psalm was used as an anthem during worship at Jewish festivals, especially the festival of Passover when the Jews remembered God's gracious liberation of their ancestors from slavery in Egypt. God's purpose in that act of redemption – of calling on Israel to see themselves as his companions in the redemption of the world – was to chose a community to be his witnesses and ambassadors throughout the world among all peoples.

This Psalm is a hymn of praise to the God who promised to be their God and nurture them as his people.

It was probably done antiphonally, one side of the assembled worshippers singing one verse, and the other side replying with the next, as we did earlier this morning.

As heirs of this covenant,
we too, here today at Brentwood,
sing this anthem and pray this Psalm
with gusto and gravity,
rejoicing in the serious calling
in which we are invited to delight.

I want to focus our reflections this morning on what this Psalm tells us about what God is really like.

There are three dimensions to the message of this Psalm.

First, it reminds us of the name of the Lord.
Second, it reminds us of the primary faithful response to God's presence.
Third, it reminds us of our role in the covenant with God.

Names are very important in the Bible, especially the names used to point to God.

In the ancient Middle East,
names stood for something.

They pointed to the nature, the presence, and the power of the person.

This was especially true of the names used for gods.

This Psalm gives us a good refresher course
on what God's name signified for the singers of this Psalm.

He rules over all nations.

His glory is above everything.

There is nothing and no one comparable to the God of Israel.

He is a God of compassion and equity,

raising the poor from the dust

and making them colleagues with the rich.

He is a God of fertility,

endowing even the barren wife with offspring.

So, overwhelming power expressed in sensitive compassion.

That is what God's name reminds us of.

And that memory,

if it is rightly and richly shaped by the meaning God has given to his name,

is filled with the unique stories of God's redemptive presence

in human history from the time of Creation.

This is not just any god that we can imagine to satisfy our lusts and longings.

This is a God who defines himself by what he does for his creation,

not a god who is designed by humans to meet their wants.

Now that is not to say that Jews and Christians

have not been proficient in creating God in their own image.

It has happened over and over again in the history of these people of faith.

Rather than answering the call

to be transformed in the service of God's kingdom,

we have transformed God's kingdom into a justification

for our narrow and fear-filled prejudices.

And that particular form of denying what God is really like

has sown the seeds of conflict, war, oppression, and injustice around the world.

Recall the Middle East, Afghanistan, South Africa, and even our own country.

You can't understand this God

without knowing something about the way he redeemed the world.

To know that, you have to engage seriously with the story of Jesus of Nazareth,

the One in whom God came to be with human beings and the creation.

To know what God is really like,

Christians have always invited people to come and see Jesus.

This is a God whose grandeur is expressed in grace,

whose palace is a stable,

whose home is the open road,

whose throne is a cross.

These are the symbols of this God's greatness.

It is in the stories of who *this* God is and what *this* God has done,
not in the convoluted speculations of human beings,
be they Stephen Hawking or Rush Limbaugh or Christopher Hitchens,
that we find out who God really is and what he is really like.

Our response to *this* God, whom we see most clearly in Jesus Christ,
is to glorify him and enjoy him forever.

That is the first and foremost responsibility of the faithful.

In living in this way, they will flourish.

What such praise really does is keep our attention focused
on our relationship with the source of our being in all its abundance.

It is our conversations with *this* God that nourish us to flourish.

It is our fellowship of praise with those who strive to follow Jesus
that provides the social network and influence
that helps us live faithful lives graced with forgiveness.

And what we do with those lives is to serve.

It's right there in the first line of the Psalm –

“Ye servants of the Lord,
praise his name.”

Our service begins in praise,

but it flows out of the sanctuary into the world
in the form of compassion and caring.

It seeks to lift up the lowly and make fertile the barren.

The purpose of our service

is to help God help the world flourish.

The lesson for me from this Psalm
has to do with the ways in which I allow the name of the Lord
to be at the centre of my consciousness
every day in all that I do.

In a simple breath,

one beat in and two beats out,

I can say silently to myself

“God’s grace generates gratitude.”

That’s all it takes to remind me what God is really like
and to live in joy in his service.