

Psalm 93

Ascension Sunday

May 24, 2020

Anyone who has spent much time on the seashore can imagine the roaring waves the Psalmist talks about, and anyone who has spent much time on the water knows its changeability and destructive power. According to *Time* magazine, “A cubic yard of [water], filling what at first glance seems a modest volume of 3 feet by 3 feet by 3 feet, weighs nearly 1,700 pounds, as much as the Smart micro car. And when water is moving at 30 or 40 miles an hour ... the heaviness of water turns deadly. Imagine 1,700 pounds hitting you at that speed, and each cubic yard of water as another 1,700 pounds bearing down on you. The destructiveness of a tsunami is not just one runaway car, but a fleet of them.”

A fitting metaphor, then, for the mighty power of God which can bring order even to the chaos of the mighty deeps. Psalm 93 is an Enthronement Psalm, which celebrates the kingship of God. Verse 1 says, “He has established the world;” this Psalm was read in the Temple on Fridays, the end of the week, on which God rested after six days of creating the world and taming and separating the mighty waters.

So, God is a mighty king. He is more powerful than the crashing waves.

But is he more powerful than the Roman empire? Did these words ring hollow when they were read in the second Temple? When the Jews heard about the mighty power of God and looked around at the Roman legionaries keeping them controlled, did they think, “something doesn’t add up?”

How did Jesus’ disciples hear it? When God’s Messiah died naked and powerless on a Roman cross, did God seem a mighty king? God raised Jesus from death, a mighty act to be sure, and Acts tells us that over the next 40 days he appeared to and taught his followers, which must have filled them with joy.

But whereas the crucifixion was a public spectacle, the resurrection was a private, offstage affair, and his post-resurrection appearances were confined to his friends and disciples rather than an in-your-face victory lap of the Roman Empire.

If in those 40 days Jesus explained how the law, the prophets, and the Psalms – in short, the entire Hebrew Bible – spoke about him, then how did he explain what a mighty god who rules the waves themselves has to do with a crucified Messiah?

And for that matter, what does the mighty God of Psalm 93 have to do with us today? Is God more powerful than the Coronavirus? If we say no, do we really believe in the Bible? If we say yes, how do we live that out? As the BC government moves to Phase 2 of its pandemic plan, the word “re-opening” is a magic phrase to bring smiles to

our faces, a spring to our steps and a flutter to our hearts. “Can we meet in person again? Can we sing?”

Some enthusiastic Christians want to move faster. “If Wal-Mart can re-open, why can’t churches?” they ask. Some see government overreach, the impingement of democratic freedoms, and the oppression of the Church. I’ve received several emails inviting me to sign a petition or an open letter to the government demanding that they open up wider and faster. “Re-open the churches!” They say. “Let us get back to doing God’s work! Let us be Church again! Stop ignoring us! We are many; we are powerful; we’ll show you our strength! We believe in a powerful God; we are faithful!”

We want to be strong. After so many weeks of empty streets and closed businesses, of worry about income and about our loved ones who we can’t see in person, we want a strong and confident leader; we want a strong and confident God. If we say we believe in a powerful God, should we be demonstrating our faith in his protection by worshipping together?

If the God who is more powerful than the waves isn’t more powerful than the Coronavirus, what is power, anyway? What is it good for?

What is power?

Jesus’ Ascension is the answer to that question. Jesus’ Ascension is the revelation of God’s power, and a meditation on the nature of that power.

I said earlier that whereas the crucifixion was a public spectacle, the resurrection was a private, offstage affair. But the *ascension* happens *onstage*. It is an emphatic vindication of Jesus' ministry; it is an emphatic affirmation of that mocking sign over Jesus' cross: Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews. This crucified prophet is indeed the king and indeed the Son of God; the agent of God; the chosen Messiah of God. He ascends to be with God; there can be no more doubt about his identity.

If that's so, then we have to reconsider the nature of God, and the nature of God's power and kingship.

Jesus says that the law, the prophets and the psalms apply to him. Psalm 93 applies to him. If we sing Psalm 93, then we proclaim the power of God in the face of the rising waters, in the face of the crashing waves and roaring storm which could crush us. We proclaim the power of God in the face of evidence to the contrary. Just as we proclaim the power of God in the face of the cross. But God does not calm the waters, and God does not rescue Jesus from the cross. This power, then, must be the power not to overcome, but to endure and to redeem.

If we know the deeper spiritual truth that God is king, then the cross becomes the place where God's love is revealed in spite of death. If Jesus is revealed as God, then God is revealed as the one who is crucified alongside us. If we do not fear the waters, it is because God is with us even as they crash over our heads. The crashing waters thereby

roar God's praises and God's power, because they cannot separate us from God. That is power.

The cross is a torture implement, but it has become a reminder that death cannot separate us from God. Water was a symbol of death and chaos in the Ancient Near East, but we baptize with it and proclaim that as we go through the waters, our God is with us and brings us rebirth. *That is power.*

Surely, then, it is wrong to say that our churches are closed, and laughable to say that we are not the Church if the doors are not open. The God who transcends life and death, who is with us even at the cross and in the storm, is more indeed more powerful than the Coronavirus, because he does not need a building to accompany you and to empower you. If God is a king, then his kingdom is the whole world, and he is a king everywhere, and in his service we go everywhere. The Coronavirus has not silenced us, but rather sent us out into God's world.

As a poem I found says,

“Of course churches are essential...we already knew that.

When the faithful are scattered in every age

due to persecution, disaster, or plague,

we persist in worship and service -

feeding the hungry,

clothing the naked,  
welcoming the stranger,  
being good news for the poor,  
working to free the captives and oppressed.

Our highest and holy calling  
is to be the church,  
not go to church."

My friends, the powerful do not need to demonstrate their power, and we do not need to make a show of our faith by defiantly opening the Church building. The truth of the Ascension is that God is the king of the sickbed, of the homeschool, of the Zoom meeting. This is the power of God: that God is with you always.

Trust in this power; trust in the coming gift of the Holy Spirit.

**Sources:**

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