

Who Is the King of Glory?
Psalm 24
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I have a lot of wonderful memories of my childhood in the church, some of which I have probably already shared with you. My family attended the venerable Fairmount Presbyterian Church in Cleveland Heights, Ohio, a large, well-appointed church in a neighborhood of equally large, well-appointed houses. Everything about this church was larger than life, from its six foot seven inch pastor to its 100 rank Schantz pipe organ. For a child, it was a truly awe-inspiring place to grow up and experience God. One of the things that made it so was the choir loft in which we youngsters of the youth choirs both practiced on Tuesday evenings and sang on Sunday mornings. This choir loft was probably as big as half this sanctuary, and in the middle of it sat the organ console -- the keyboard and all its stops to add sounds of trumpets, clarinets, or strings. But the most impressive part of the whole choir loft was the man who sat at that organ console, playing with one hand and two feet, and conducting with the other, all while looking at us in the enormous mirror with which he could see all our misdeeds. Despite the ubiquitous presence of Jesus throughout the church in word, art, and song, in that choir loft, it was the Rev. Dr. H. Wells Near, Minister of Music, who was the closest thing to God many of us knew, at least until we could form our own more mature conceptions of God. Dr. Near wielded his divine power both gracefully and sternly,

and we always knew who was in charge. But if the truth be told, at least in hindsight, Dr. Near's role as the presence of God in our midst was due in large measure to his selection of music, choices which glorified God in a way even the best of choirs in my adult years have not been able to capture. And if there was a signature Dr. Near piece of choral music, it was surely the magnificent setting of Psalm 24 which we sang frequently, a soaring antiphonal piece with those most mysterious of words: "Lift up your heads, O ye gates, and be lifted up, ye ancient doors! That the King of glory may come in. Who is the king of glory? The Lord, strong and mighty, the Lord, mighty in battle." One side of the choir loft would sing the command to open the doors, and be answered by the other side wanting to know just who was seeking entrance, followed by the reply announcing the redeeming features of the King of Glory. You'll have to forgive me for feeling nostalgic, but could we try that here at ECF tonight? In your bulletins, you'll see the words. Thank you for indulging me.

This section of Psalm 24 was almost certainly used at some point in the worship life of ancient Israel, perhaps in much the same way we just did it. And in the reciting of these verses, they recalled the holiness and power of the God who had created them, blessed them, and protected them on their way to the Promised Land. Some Biblical scholars have suggested that this Psalm was used for an annual liturgy commemorating the very first entrance of the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem, the Ark containing the Ten Commandments and representing the

fullness of the power and might of their God. And so they remembered when those who were carrying the Ark toward the city of David reached the gates and called for them to be opened. And those within the city, charged with protecting its inhabitants from harm, returned that command with a request for an identity check, a kind of “Who dares to seek entrance into our city?” kind of challenge. And those who bore the Ark let them know just what, and who, they were dealing with, a description worth remembering through the ages: the King of glory is “the Lord, strong and mighty, the Lord, mighty in battle.” And sung or recited antiphonally, it would have been a great way to ingrain that truth into the hearts and minds of the people.

I suppose you can't be reminded too often of God's holiness and might, but that's not all there is to our God, and so Psalm 24 includes some other, pretty important stuff, some that has never gone out of style, and some that rings in our ears in a new way in our own generation. The first six verses, of course, lay the foundation for the declaration of God's power that follows, but they deserve some attention on their own merits, so let us give them their due. And so the beginning of this great Psalm declares that “The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it; for he has founded it on the seas, and established it on the rivers.” To be sure, these words say something about the creative power of God. Indeed, in ancient Israel, to say that God subdued the waters of the world to establish the earth was really saying something dramatic. In the cultures that

surrounded Israel, the chaos of the waters, the rivers, lakes, and seas, was feared above all other parts of nature, and the fact that Israel's God could bring order to those raging waters spoke volumes about the power and might of that God. In our own day, however, as amazing as that might be, I hope these words speak something more to us that our ancestors may not have needed to hear. I am referring of course to our stewardship of the gift of creation, to our care of the earth God founded on the seas and established on the rivers. You see, as loudly as it speaks to the power to create the earth, Psalm 24 also speaks to ownership of it, and it is not ours! "The earth is the Lord's, and all that is in it." There is no part of God's creation that we created, no part that we own exclusively, no part we can claim for ourselves. We may think we own something because we have title to a piece of property, but we are really just renting, squatting even, on someone else's land. This Psalm is our rental contract, on one hand outlining our rights and responsibilities on the earth we have been given, but on the other, firmly establishing that we are indeed not, in the end, the masters of our own domain.

This distinction has, of course, become clearer in the last hundred years or so, when the threats to human life caused by environmental exploitation have both increased exponentially and become all too obvious. Not even taking into account the extinction of thousands of species of God's good creation, a fact which must surely be grievous to God, the destruction and pollution and inequality of distribution of the fruits of this generous planet speak to our conviction that we

have the equation reversed, that the earth is *ours*, and all that is in it. Maybe in the time in which this Psalm was written, there were some in Israel who lamented the cutting of the cedars of Lebanon, or the damming of the River Jordan, but I don't believe this Psalm was written as an environmentalist's protest. But it does suggest that those in ancient Israel had a keener sense of the appropriate relationship between God and God's creation than we do, or than we have had. Perhaps in their precarious existence, they could see more clearly than we can the relationship between the use of God's good earth and the purposes for which it was given: to sustain the life of all of God's people. It suggests that we take a good hard look at whether we really believe that "the earth is the *Lord's* and all that is in it" or just give lip service to that great truth, and then act accordingly. Unless and until the blessings of God's creation are shared with all of "the world, and those who live in it," this Psalm should challenge every day our stewardship of our environment.

If the opening verses of Psalm 24 sound differently in our ears in our own time, the verses that follow them have an all too familiar ring about them. They speak to our worthiness: "Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in his holy place?" They speak to our faithfulness as followers of Jesus Christ: "Those who have clean hands and pure hearts, who do not lift up their souls to what is false, and do not swear deceitfully." They speak to our hopes: "They will receive blessing from the Lord, and vindication from the God of their salvation." They speak to our need for community: "Such is the company of those who seek

him, who seek the face of the God of Jacob.” These issues of worthiness and faithfulness and hope and community are as age old as the earth itself, for they are rooted in God’s love for all creation. We live them out in fear and trembling just as our ancestors did in ancient Israel. How can we be worthy of God’s mercy? How can we offer ourselves in a way that is pleasing to God? Can we really count on God’s promises? Am I all alone in the world?

The good news of course is that the God who is powerful enough to create the earth and all that is in it, and who is strong and mighty, mighty in battle, is the same God who makes us worthy in Jesus Christ, who helps us to be faithful through the Holy Spirit, who keeps the promises our hopes are founded upon, and who gives us one another as companions on the journey. Our ancestors in the faith were as keenly aware as we are that we couldn’t do any of that on their own, that they, like we, depend entirely on God for not only food for our bodies, but nourishment for our spirits. They were as keenly aware as we are of how easy it is to take God for granted, and so they reminded themselves through this Psalm of the need to be attentive to their relationship with their creator.

As a child at Fairmount Presbyterian Church, I learned something valuable about God as I watched the Rev. Dr. H. Wells Near, and as I sang again and again the final verses of Psalm 24. But it was only the beginning of what could be learned from these ten short verses. It is only as we take the time to dig deeper into our Scriptures that we learn from the past and see where God is calling in the

future. And especially in the Psalms, probably as overlooked as any other part of the Bible, is great wisdom and inspiration for the challenges we face as individuals, as Christ's church, and as citizens of the world. In none of these challenges do we go it alone, for as long as we carry faith in Jesus Christ before us, there is no place we cannot enter when we approach it saying, "Lift up your heads, O gates! And be lifted up ye ancient doors that the king of glory may come in." And hearing that challenge, the world will inevitably ask, "Who is the King of glory?" And we can respond, "The Lord, strong and mighty, the Lord, mighty in battle. The Lord of hosts, he is the King of glory," and be sure that God is truly with us. Amen.