

Humbled
Psalm 29
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Push a button, reheat your coffee. Flip a switch, bring light into the darkness. Browse Facebook, find your long lost childhood sweetheart half a world away. It is now so easy to manipulate our surroundings that we almost forget just how long it took to get this far and how many sacrifices were made. And every new labor-saving, leisure-creating, energy-gobbling, DNA-manipulating device leads us to believe that our power to create, transform, and even destroy with impunity is in fact limitless. I truly believe it is only a matter of time before we cure even the common cold, Parkinson's, cancer, diabetes and all the rest. Given what we've accomplished so far, we human beings can hardly be blamed for having swelled heads.

And meanwhile the earth shifts and cracks in Haiti. A wave rises in Indonesia and falls in Thailand and Sri Lanka. Two massive storm systems collide over the Eastern US. Casualty lists in the tens of thousands. Hundreds of thousands more are injured, homeless, and despairing. Economic damage in the billions. Generations, villages, livelihoods, gone in no more time than it takes to do knee replacement surgery or liposuction. Perhaps in the future there will be even more wondrous feats of human engineering like better early warning systems which might spare more lives, but you can't stop the rain. You can't keep tectonic plates

from moving. You can't prevent the wind from blowing. In addition to the damage and heartbreak that the world's natural disasters inflict, especially to those who have lost so much, it is also a humbling reminder that we human beings are most definitely not in charge of everything.

It's a miracle of modern technology, but you can still freeze in Goretex. You can also be crushed like a tin can in the best nuclear submarine, drown in a just inch of water, and get struck by lightning making even your shortest and ugliest golf swing. When you try to go toe to toe with Mother Nature, Big Mama's usually gonna win. As thoroughly as we seem to have tamed the elements, it is elemental that we will ultimately come up humbled, and probably afraid. Those kinds of experiences, which most of us have had in one form or another, begin to give us some sense of what the psalmist is talking about in Psalm 29 when describing God's power expressed in the natural world: "The voice of the Lord breaks the cedars. The voice of the Lord flashes forth flames of fire. The voice of the Lord shakes the wilderness. The voice of the Lord causes the oaks to whirl and strips the forest bare." In the midst of our hubris, sooner or later we come face to face with that which puts us in our place, humbles us, reminds us of just who's in charge, and makes us, like the Psalmist, add, "And in his temple, all say, 'Glory!'"

We watch the aftermath of these uncontrollable events, and inevitably feelings arise of sadness and pity and even gratitude that it was not us. And maybe, in addition to all these, you have felt profoundly humbled in the face of a power so

much greater than anything we as a human race have been able to assemble, greater than anything we could imagine, greater than we would really even want to imagine. And though the final words of the Psalmist are not the exact ones which usually constitute my prayers as the disaster coverage unfolds, they are in the same vein: “May the Lord give strength to his people! May the Lord bless his people with peace.” What else can you really say when humbled in such a way? Perhaps only “Lord have mercy, Lord have mercy.”

But consider this. The same voice of God which the Psalmist says causes all manner of humbling natural experiences is the very same voice of God which calls us children of God, the same voice of God which says, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of people,” the same voice of God which bids “Take up your mat and walk,” the same voice which cries out for justice, mercy, and compassion, the same voice which reassured a hesitant John the Baptist in the Jordan River, the same voice which commands us to “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” Indeed, it is the same voice which has spoken to some of us as pastors, some as missionaries, some as parents, some as musicians, some as teachers, some as friends, all of them enormous and humbling responsibilities. In all the ways it speaks, from a still small voice to the breaking of the cedars of Lebanon, the voice of God has the power to humble all who hear it. But do we let it humble us in every way, or just those that bring calamity, fear, and horror?

Get in your car, come to your beautiful and spacious church. Open your Bible, read the Word of God. Pray in public, practice your faith worry-free. It is now so easy for North American Christians, even in Costa Rica, to “do” religion that we almost forget just how long it took to get this far and how many sacrifices were made. And it’s easy to be humbled by thirty foot waves, collapsed buildings, and flooded Subway tunnels. But the challenge for Christians who practice their faith in relative ease, comfort, and affluence is to be humbled even when, or more accurately, especially when, we are not in the presence of such awe-inspiring power as we’ve seen recently. The challenge is to be humbled even when we are strong, and even when the war is not waged on our own soil. The challenge is to be humbled by the fact that there is a church near you and that you don’t have to walk to come to it and by the fact that you can read the Bible and don’t have to have it read to you and by the fact that you are not living in fear of being arrested, fired, or ostracized because you follow Jesus Christ. The challenge is to be humbled by the power of God not only when 150,000 people have died, but also when one person has experienced abundant life in Jesus Christ because of our witness, our testimony, our doing the right thing even when it is unpopular.

The truth is that being humbled changes, or at least should change, our perspective on things. It makes us, or ought to make us, grateful, and generous, and compassionate, and empathetic, all the Christian traits which help the world recover from tragedies like tsunamis and earthquakes and floods and all the rest.

But who among us hasn't asked, "Why do we only seem to come together as a community during times of crisis?" I would suggest that it is because we do not allow ourselves to be humbled very often, for no one wants to feel small and vulnerable and at the mercy of something larger and more powerful. But that is the heart of faith in Jesus Christ, isn't it? The very Son of God who allowed himself to be humbled by being baptized like a common sinner in the River Jordan? The incarnate Lord who let himself be pierced and bleed and die to show the Roman Empire, and us, just how powerless we really are? The one who became a servant of all, washing the feet of those who dirtied their feet following him? The paradox is that precisely when we are at our weakest, our most humbled, God makes us the strongest, and part of the very power of God with which God humbles us in the first places.

With apologies to the Canadians in our midst, for whom references to Thanksgiving Day come a few weeks late, there are still a few days before that traditional day set aside to remember the blessings in our lives. Despite origins that are probably more than a little dubious, the power of Thanksgiving Day remains fixed in the myth of that shared meal between the original people of the land, the Wampanoag Indians, and the European newcomers to Plymouth who were having a tough time of it, each contributing something for the table. If we believe that version of events, for me the power of the story is in the humility both sides displayed, the Indians who had every reason to distrust the Europeans, but helped

anyway, and the Europeans who had to admit they couldn't make it on their own, and needed the help of those they most likely considered inferior.

Psalm 29 reminds us of the greatness of God, and our need for dependence on God and one another. None of us can weather the storm alone, neither the Pilgrims of the 17th century, or the pilgrims in this room tonight. The Psalm concludes with these majestic and humbling words: "The Lord sits enthroned over the flood; the Lord sits enthroned forever. May the Lord give strength to his people! May the Lord bless his people with peace." Let me conclude tonight with the equally humbling words we sang during tonight's time with young disciples:

I have a Maker
He formed my heart
Before even time began
My life was in his hands

He knows my name
He knows my every thought
He sees each tear that falls
And He hears me when I call

No matter where you find your humility, whether in storm, story, or song, make the most of it, letting it issue forth in the kind of thanksgiving that brings peace both to your own heart, and to the whole world. Amen.