

Listen to Him
Matthew 17:1-9 and Psalm 2
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Experts on human communication say that the average preacher has six minutes to hold the average congregation's attention, before it starts wandering off and they begin thinking about whatever else they plan to do with their day, like will they have to wait long to get a table at the breakfast buffet. But since we meet at night and the breakfast buffet is already closed, and because you are not an average congregation, I figure I have about six and a half minutes, so let's get started with looking at Psalm 2 in five acts.

Psalm 2, Act 1: A group of teenagers sits at McDonald's, plotting their revolution. Well, not a revolution really, so much as how they plan to get out from under their parents' authority, since, you know, all parents do is sit around all day and plan how to make their children's lives miserable. This group of teenagers talks about how they have no freedom to decide anything about their lives, and how they are constantly prevented from having any fun, and how they are completely misunderstood, how they are in bondage to their parents' wishes. And so, they decide to have a party at the home of one of the group whose parents have uncharacteristically fallen down on the job and decided to entrust the house to their kids while they go away for the weekend. Many details go into the planning of this

party, details which are unknowingly overheard by a neighbor listening in from behind a newspaper at the next table...

Psalm 2, Act 2: A group of parents sits in the living room of one of their homes and has a good laugh about the revolution's plans for the aforementioned party. Statements like "Who do they think they are?" and "Did they really think they would get away with it?" are at the center of the conversation. But then the lighthearted gathering turns more serious and even a little angry as the parents start trading resentment that their best efforts to raise these children has resulted in this attempted coup. "We'll put a stop to this party, that's what we'll do!" they decide as they stomp home in fury.

Psalm 2, Act 3: One couple sits on their bed reflecting on the meeting that has just taken place and turned to outrage. Talking it through a little more, their heads begin to cool, and they remember that their desire as parents is not to punish transgression so much as nurture righteousness, and they remember the feeling of responsibility they'd had when their now-rebellious teenager had first been born. "Maybe this can be a learning opportunity," one says to the other. "Maybe" comes the reply.

Psalm 2, Act 4: A tense moment at the kitchen table where these parents have convened a meeting with the young revolutionary. "We hear there's a party," they say, "and we think it's a bad idea for you to go." "Well, I'll go if I want to" is the reaction, to which the parents respond, "Fine, but if you go, you'll be on your

own with no one to blame for whatever trouble you get into. Don't call us when the cops raid the house, or when you get picked up for drunk driving, or you end up a parent at a young age. That will all be on you. But know this, that whether you believe it or not, it is in this house is where you'll find all the freedom you could ever desire, the freedom to speak your mind, and to pursue your dreams, and even to fail and still be loved. The choice is yours.”

Psalm 2, Act 5: A teenager ponders, fiddling with some car keys...

Are my six and a half minutes up yet? Or can they start now?

As I read Psalm 2 this week, the little drama I shared with you came to my mind and stuck there long enough that it seemed somehow necessary for me to share it with you. Perhaps its inspiration is that the psalm itself presents its own drama in five acts, with distinct voices. The nations conspire against God and God's appointed representative, the King of Israel. God laughs at such a notion, and becomes angry at their hubris and lack of respect, and so charges the King of Israel to put them in their place with a warning that if they submit to the ways of the God of the whole universe it will go well for them, and if they do not, it can only turn out bad, because, indeed, in the end, “Happy are those who take refuge in him.” But the choice is always ours, to follow the one whose shining face leads us into a future full of hope, justice, and grace, or to follow our own paths to meet whatever disaster lays ahead. It's an old story. But it's also today's story.

The Bible is filled with stories of our own lives, some of them disguised in “My God is better than your god” psalms, and “Defy me and you will suffer” prophecies that we have to dig deeper into if we want to discover how to make it through the challenges our lives present us. You see, it’s easy to dismiss phrases like, “Then he will speak to them in his wrath, and terrify them in his fury” as the relics of a pre-scientific civilization who believed their God was first and foremost a great warrior. But if that is as far as we engage the story, we’ll miss out on how it speaks to our own experience.

Psalm 2 was probably used every year in worship to celebrate the ascension to the throne of the King of Israel, God’s chosen one, the one who was to help make Israel a light unto the nations, the one who was to help the whole world see that the God of Israel was not the God of only Israel, but of every other tribe and nation as well. This is what is behind the promise that God “will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession.” That result is not to glorify the king, of course, like some kind of reward, but rather to glorify God, to whom it already belonged. The King of whom Psalm 2 speaks may or may not have been King David, but we’ll presume it was, for he was the King about whom the words from that psalm, “You are my son; today I have begotten you,” most appropriately apply when we look at all the kings who both preceded and followed him, the ones who seemed to confuse the glory of the Lord with the glory of the king. David was the one who acted most like how a good son would act.

You may remember that in that time and region, it was quite common for the King of a nation to be understood as the son of that nation's god, for the son in those days, especially the first-born son, was virtually the father. The son represented the family in matters of business or war or justice, maybe even carried the ring or the staff or the seal of the father, which provided proof that he was who he said he was. And so naturally, like a son, the nation's King would be considered an extension of the nation's god, the one who represented that god, and served that god's purposes, and was charged with the care of that god's people. Israel's King David was no exception. And neither are you.

You may have never thought of yourself that way, but especially as parents, or if you are in any position of authority or influence, you have that same charge: to represent God, to serve God's purposes, and to care for those for whom you have responsibility, whether that responsibility is a formal one or an informal one. It is an awesome charge, and sometimes an awesome burden, especially when you have to remind a young revolutionary what real freedom is all about. But it can also be a great joy, such as when you have the opportunity to praise or affirm, to use words like those Jesus and the disciples heard from within the cloud, "This is my son, the beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!"

Whether we are sons or daughters, isn't that what we'd all like to hear? That we'd made our parents proud? That we have that special place in their hearts? That they think we are worthy of being presented to the world, that we have something

the world needs to hear? Probably, many of us have been blessed to hear, out loud, these affirmations. Others may still be waiting and hoping, or lamenting that it will never be possible to hear them, due to death or estrangement. In his book, “The Wisdom of our Fathers,” in which he collects stories that sons and daughters told him about their fathers, the late Tim Russert notes just how many people knew that their fathers loved and cherished them, even if they came from a generation from which saying out loud never would have occurred to them. Even so, many longed to hear what their fathers could never say. That kind of affirmation, he learned, is very, very, important. Let us not be stingy with it, even if it is hard to say it.

These are human parents and children I am talking about, of course, and maybe Jesus longed to hear some affirmation too. I don't think that is why these words are included both here, and in the story of Jesus' baptism, but I'm glad they are there, if they remind us to both tell others they are loved and cherished, and to try to be loveable and cherishable to others. Certainly, the love others have for us isn't based on our perfection, and that was true for Jesus as well, even though he was perfect, but it is worth trying to be someone worth loving. I don't mean we try to make people love us, but that by being who and what God wants us to be, we embody the kind of love that brings some light into this world, and we'll find ourselves loved and cherished. A great many people spend their time trying to earn the favor of others, instead of living into the favor of God they've already received through Jesus Christ. But when we know we are loved by God, it makes the burden

of our responsibility a lighter one, and those around us have a better chance of knowing that too.

And so there is that voice from the clouds that tells the disciples to listen to Jesus, and it is there because they need to listen to Jesus teaching them how to be the son, who acts on behalf of the father, who is a light to the nations, who helps the whole world see that the God of Israel was not the God of only Israel, but of every other tribe and nation as well. And he teaches them how to be the son by showing them just how much they are loved, whether in a parable about a prodigal son, or by healing someone that no one else cared about, or in so many other ways, because when we know we are loved, we can love like the father loves, and love like the son loves.

We parents all think we are God, don't we, if we are honest? We know right from wrong, safe from dangerous, wise from foolish, or at least we think we do. Of course, we are just as foolish as our children who think we hold them in bondage, with cords they must cut. But even though we eventually figure out we are not God, and we get it wrong, and we screw it up, God has still chosen us to be the parents of our children, or the aunts and uncle and mentors of others if we don't have our own. And listening to Jesus Christ, we'll become the kind of people who create a home or a church where our children find all the freedom they could ever desire, the freedom to speak their minds, and to pursue their dreams, and even to fail and still be loved. The choice is yours. Amen.