

Can God Really Hold It Together?  
Psalm 33  
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It has been a pretty serious week or two. Embassies bombed, homes and bridges washed away, earthquakes and tornados wreaking havoc, prices of food and gasoline skyrocketing, doctors sitting in their living rooms shot by mentally disturbed neighbors, fourth graders, whose fathers are already being treated for cancer, landing in the hospital with brain tumors -- it's been a pretty heavy couple of weeks. And that's all just somebody else's stuff! On top of all the world's trauma, you've got your own. As one ECFer put it about the Wilson family's most recent news: "It makes me ask myself how much one can take?" This isn't what God had in mind, and it's not what we have in mind either for what life is supposed to be like. It's been a tough couple of weeks.

And so I want to share an image with you, both because we need a break from quite so much heaviness, but also because it's an image of God I want you to have in mind as we take a deeper look tonight at Psalm 33. (Watch YouTube video at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rui5VWZYJU8&feature=related>).

No, God is not our divine entertainment, but God is the only one who can keep all the world's plates spinning, and yet still have time for some extra tricks with eggs and spoons, to clean up some messes, and to interact with the crowd, all

without it coming crashing down. At least that's what I think Psalm 33 is saying.

We may not know just how God can do it, but we do know we can't do it.

In the heavier weeks of the year, the serious weeks of the year, the weeks in which we ask ourselves, "just how much one can take?," we could be excused for wondering if in fact, God can keep it all together, or whether maybe one day God is going to drop a plate, and something in the world will be irretrievably broken, that God will be so busy tending to a natural disaster at one end of the world, that a need on the other end won't get the attention it needs, and wobblier and wobblier it will get until, with a crash, that's it, God is exposed as a fraud, and the illusion is ripped away of God's omnipotence and power. Or maybe in weeks like this it already feels like a plate has fallen, that if God were really up to the task, none of that stuff would happen. And of course, when it is "stuff" in our own lives that is wobbling precariously, we look up and see that it is no ordinary plate spinning there, but one our grandmother's priceless, one of a kind, heirloom china plates, the stuff that really means something to us, the stuff which one can never replace but only remember. In these weeks, our confidence in God is tested, and we find ourselves searching the Bible for answers, for reassurance, and if we are lucky, we find our way to the 33<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, where we meet again the great plate spinning God.

Psalm 33 is one of those "without a doubt" psalms, the kind which portray an absolutely unwavering sense of confidence in God's power and presence. Look at the wonderful ways in which God is described: "For the word of the Lord is

upright, and all his work is done in faithfulness. He loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of the steadfast love of the world. By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, and all the host by the breath of his mouth. He gathered the waters of the sea as in a bottle; he put the deeps in storehouses. Let all the earth fear the Lord; let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him. For he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm.” Wow. God doesn’t even need to touch those plates to keep them spinning; just a simple word will do it. In this psalm, there are no wobbling plates, no hint of an amateur tending your grandmother’s china. There is only the God of steadfast love, a God we can trust, a God we have to trust, to hold our world together, even when we see the plates we are trying to keep spinning crashing down around us.

It is on this God we are blessed to meditate when the world doesn’t make sense. It is about this God we are blessed to say, “Our soul waits for the Lord; he is our help and shield. Our heart is glad in him, because we trust in his holy name. Let your steadfast love, O Lord, be upon us, even as we hope in you.” It is upon this God we can cast the questions the Psalmist doesn’t even ask, and still know we are under that steadfast love of the one who calls each of us into relationship, even while tending to all the cares of the world. The Psalmist is not naïve enough to think that nothing unpleasant ever happens, or even that God should prevent “bad things” from happening, but rather, that in the midst of those unpleasantries and tragedies, God is still steadfast: “Truly the eye of the Lord is on those who fear

him, on those who hope in his steadfast love, to deliver their soul from death, and to keep them alive in famine.” Death and famine are always with us, but God keeps us alive in the midst of them.

But this Psalm is not only about God keeping us alive during famine, but perhaps more importantly keeping our faith alive in weeks like this one. The question then is not, “Can God really hold it all together?” but rather, “How can we hold our faith together?” And so, graciously, even as Psalm 33 builds our confidence in the Divine plate spinner who un failingly keeps the world moving, it also describes how we can keep all of the plates of our hope and confidence in God moving. And because that is serious business too, let me share another image with you, both because we need a break from quite so much seriousness, but also because it’s an image of yourselves I want you to have in mind as we take a deeper look at the rest of Psalm 33. (Watch YouTube video at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vmhk38oq194>)

The truth is that it is all too easy to approach our faith like the clown in this video, and then wonder why all our plates fall down and why God seems to let us down. When I first saw this video, I thought of the word “fool,” the word the Bible frequently uses to describe those who follow their own ways, and who do not take care to respect the ways God has given us to be in relationship with God and with one another. And even though Psalm 33 doesn’t explicitly use the contrast of the fool and the wise man many other Psalms use, instruction for the wise is there

implicitly, advice which can help us keep our plates of faith spinning even in the midst of trying weeks such as this one. The guy in the first video didn't get as good as he is by eating potato chips on the couch and jumping up and spinning some plates; he practiced for hours and days and years to be able to do what he does. He had to employ the methods and practices available to get where he did. So too do we need to practice, if we would have a faith which perseveres when everything is wobbly around us.

Let's begin then where the Psalmist begins, in verses 1-3, with rejoicing, praising and singing. In weeks like this one, it may be tough to muster much enthusiasm for joy, praise, and music, and so that is why in those weeks when the world doesn't seem quite so dire, we need to store up a little extra joy, praise, and music to draw upon when we need them. The fool says, all is right with the world; why should I think about it now? The wise person gives thanks and rejoices always to build up a memory of plenty, so that that in those times of want, he or she doesn't have to go far to remember God's providence. How easy it is to forget God when times are good, when nothing seems to be threatening our shalom. Beware that trap; rejoice, praise, and sing to the Lord when you have the chance!

Another set of imperatives found in Psalm 33 have to do with the healthy respect the wise person has for God. "Let all the earth fear the Lord; let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him. Truly the eye of the Lord is on those who fear him." The wisdom of the first chapter of Proverbs tells us that "The fear

of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.”

Taking some time to remember that God is God and you are not, is time well spent.

When our God too closely resembles ourselves, we who can't keep the plates

spinning, it is no wonder we begin to doubt that God can keep it all together,

because in those times of doubt, we are really reflecting on our own inability, not

God's. But cultivating that sense of the difference between us and God, that fear

and awe the Bible talks about so often, will give us the distance to remember that

God can keep it going even when we can't.

The last set of imperatives we find in Psalm 33 may be the hardest, but also

the most precious. Those are the ones we find at the end of the Psalm, in verses 20-

22. “Our soul *waits* for the Lord; he is our help and shield. Our heart is glad in him

because we *trust* in his holy name. Let your steadfast love, O Lord, be upon us,

even as we *hope* in you.” Waiting and trusting and hoping, maybe three of the

hardest things to do in the Christian life, but gifts of God nonetheless. The good

news, of course, is that the object of our waiting, and our trusting, and our hoping,

makes doing those things easier. How much harder is it to trust someone who has

already burned you once? But God doesn't burn us or betray us, even if it feels like

it from time to time, and so God is worthy of trust, and keeps that trust, and I have

to remember that God is different from those other persons in whom my trust was

misplaced. I have to remember that God's timetable is different than my own. I

have to remember that my hope is not some vague, unspecific wish for a better life, but an assurance of abundant life in Jesus Christ, who is hope defined.

And so, equipped with an attitude of gratitude, a healthy dose of respect for God, and the gift of a trustworthy God, we may just have a chance to make it through tough weeks like this one, when it seems like everything is out of control. We won't be spared heartache, but neither will we be crushed by it. We won't avoid seeing ugliness, but we'll see some beauty in spite of it. We won't have all our questions answered, but we also won't need to doubt, because we will be able to remember that "the earth is full of the steadfast love of the Lord," and that is a love on which we can depend and a love which never comes crashing down. May May God help us to deepen our knowledge of the steadfast love of the Lord which is upon us, even as we hope in our God. Amen.