



Holy Thunder + Psalm 29
The Baptism of Our Lord
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The Book of Psalms has modestly been called “the prayer book of the Bible.” But it is so much more than that. This dazzling collection of songs that has been handed down to us opens our ears and hearts to the entire record of human experience, from mountaintop moments to the depths of grief and despair.

Yet the psalms are not just descriptions of what people felt two or three thousand years ago. They are poetry of the highest order. Not only is the inventiveness of the parallelism stunning – compare any couplet and see how the second verse creatively amplifies the first – but these are also outpourings of joy and terror, ecstasy and alienation have an uncanny way of reaching out to us in our chaotic and unpredictable world so that we, too, may find our way back to God’s abundant mercy and never-ending love.

Among these, Psalm 29 sweeps us up in a flight of poetic imagery like no other. The psalmist is witnessing a ferocious thunderstorm of staggering power. It descends on Lebanon and Mount Hermon the north with explosions of lightning and thunder, sweeps down through Canaan and finally erupts in the southern desert with explosive force.

Even the mighty cedars of Lebanon are not spared. Instead they break like toothpicks. The earth itself trembles and jolts like the prancing of a calf. The mountains quake like the wild bullying of a young ox. As the storm reaches its southernmost point it causes the trees to tremble and strips entire forests bare.

What caused the storm? Not extreme atmospheric conditions, but the voice of the Lord. The same voice that spoke creation into being. The same voice that announced at Jesus’ baptism that God as well-pleased with God’s Son. And you can bet that in neither of those other instances was the voice of the Lord a whisper. Instead it amounted to a shaking and disrupting of the entire created order.

What does the psalmist tell us the response was of God’s faithful people? “And in the temple of the Lord, all are crying, ‘Glory!’”

What does this mean? *Was bedeutet das?* as Martin Luther would say. A cheap answer would be, well, that’s God for you, so great and so strong and so mighty that our only response is to bow down and worship. But this tells us nothing we don’t already know. Why then bother writing the psalm at all?

Instead, it is in the word “Glory” we find a clue to how this psalm is speaking to us today.

In the Hebrew experience, to pray is to commit to God one's entire human capacity—everything that we are -- foremost of which is the suffering of body and soul. Remember that from Genesis 2 on we have been separated from God. Our deepest desire, and God's, is that we return to the Lord with all our heart.

The cry of "Glory" is the ultimate expression of prayer in that it lays bare the depth of human suffering and the desperate hope that God will act to restore us to wholeness. The cry "Glory!" is the summation of the soul's reliance on God, a cry for God to intervene where human actions have failed.

In today's world, at this moment there is no greater concentration of extreme suffering than in Gaza. On average three times more people are dying there on a daily basis, than in any other major conflict in the 21st century. The majority are women and children. Methods of warfare include forced starvation, cutting off essential services such as water, electricity, and communication, and blocking the entry of humanitarian aid. Christ crucified again, and again, and again, and again, in lives lost, schools crushed, and neighborhoods obliterated, so that Gaza from space now looks largely like an ashen wasteland.

What must the cry be in the hearts of those under such indiscriminate attack?

For those who are even able to pray, one imagines the entire heart and soul and being lifted to God. A call for God to act. To bring about a seismic shift. A call for God's voice to break through the madness. "And in the temple, all are crying, 'Glory!'"

The time has come for holy thunder. What voices have we today who can speak God's justice? None that have surpassed the holy thunder of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. A voice for his time but also a voice for ours and in the ages to come: I cannot sit idly by in Hatfield and not be concerned about what is happening in Gaza. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly.

Words, of course, from King's *Letter from Birmingham Jail*.

The time for sitting idly by is over. Now it is for us to cry "Glory." A cry for God to act. The same cry that we lift as we face the sudden death of a child, or a friend, or a beloved church member. Let us be in the temple crying "Glory," as we acknowledge that only God can heal.