

Holy and Awesome

A Sermon Preached by Christopher A. Joiner

First Presbyterian Church, Franklin, Tennessee

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4th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year B

Psalm 111



In the middle of a presbytery meeting that was descending into conflict and chaos, an elder stands up in the back and says, “I make a motion that we all stand, join hands, and say the Lord’s Prayer.” We stand, and begin, “Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name...” and as the familiar cadences fill the sanctuary from deep memory, the lines on grim faces soften, clinched fists open, and by the time we get to “forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors,” you sense that it is actually happening. The forgiveness the prayer asks is being granted. The meeting continues as one body, re-formed by words etched in memory.

Sitting in a room with someone ravaged by dementia, hearing her say the same sentence over and over, her family gently reminding her that she’s already said it, that, yes, I’m the pastor of the church. “You know the church, mama, the one on the highway.” I know when I leave she will have no memory I was ever there. Toward the end of our time, I read the 23rd psalm, from the King James Version: “The Lord is my shepherd...” and by the second phrase, her soft and shaky voice has joined in, summoned from some deep grooves that even this horrible disease cannot erase: ... “I shall not want.”

There was a man in the church I served in Memphis who came to me in the first year I was there to complain about the “long prayer” we pray during Communion. After a few moments, I gathered he was talking about the Great Prayer of Thanksgiving. “Yes, that one,” he said. “I have taken to calling it the Great Big Prayer of Thanksgiving. Why do we need all of that?” I responded that the prayer is broken into three sections that tell the story of God’s presence with us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and that this is our story, which we tell each time we celebrate Communion. It’s like the family story that gets told whenever the family eats together.

He didn’t seem satisfied in the moment with the answer, but I never heard him complain about the prayer again. And then, when I was called to his bedside, his body ravaged by cancer, I brought Communion. It was likely to be his last. As I got ready to pray during Communion, I joked, “No worries Dave. This won’t be the Great Big Prayer of Thanksgiving.” He responded, “I actually would like to hear it. It’s grown on me.” I

quickly turned the pages of the book and found a version. And when I got to the part that says, “joining our voices with choirs of angels and with all the faithful of every time and place who forever sing to the glory of your name, he was joining in: “Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might, heaven and earth are full of your glory...”

The Christian tradition didn't invent the importance of repetition and ritual. We inherited it from our sisters and brothers in the Jewish tradition, who, in psalms like the one we hear today, sought to form in the people a deep memory of what God had done and was doing in their midst.

Psalms 111 is an acrostic poem, with each of its twenty-two lines after the opening line beginning with the next letter of the Hebrew alphabet, in order. There are nine acrostic psalms in the psalter. Most scholars believe this was a memory device, a way of helping the people hold onto the words and recall them as easily as they recalled their ABC's. The psalm tells a story in such a way that the hearer will be able to call upon it and be formed by it.

The formation the psalmist proclaims is named at the very beginning. “I will praise you with my whole heart.” Another translation says, “I will praise you with everything I am.” The heart was and is a metaphor for the essence of who we are as a person, our deepest selves. The psalmist wants everything in him aligned with praise.

How do we align ourselves so that we can praise God with our whole heart? The psalm tells the story of God with Israel. In each phrase, a memory is evoked. “Wonderful deeds” is a code word in Hebrew for God's marvelous acts in establishing God's people, the exodus from Egypt.

“Gracious and merciful” were the words used to describe God after the Israelites had worshipped a golden calf in the wilderness. God forgave them because God was gracious and merciful.

Giving food to those who fear God is a reference to the manna and quails God gave in the wilderness.

The gift of the nations as Israel's heritage refers to their settlement of the land of Canaan, which God said was a land flowing with milk and honey.

The covenant refers to the gift of the Law, and especially the ten commandments, as a sign of God's presence and the kind of people God calls them to be.

Each line, beginning with the next letter of the alphabet, opened a world of memory to the Jewish people. The memory is a powerful one: God is holy and awesome.

When the people are feeling isolated and besieged, the psalm recalls God's saving presence, when memory begins to fade in the face of trying times, the psalm calls them back to the story that defines them.

We share with the Jewish people memorable words in worship – the Peace of Christ, the Law, the Apostle's Creed, the Lord's Prayer, parts of that Great (big) Prayer of Thanksgiving, the words that accompany baptism, as they did for William/Grant today. We do not say these things, we do not memorize these words, for their own sake. We are being formed by these words.

Formed exactly into what? Again, the psalmist tells us. We are being formed into people who fear the LORD, so that we might begin to be wise. This fear is not what we think of as being afraid. Quite the contrary, it is expressed as praise and delight. Karl Barth, preaching to prisoners in Basel, Switzerland in 1958, said, the fear of God is "inspired with secret jubilation and is born of gratitude." William Brown says we should not call it fear, but rather "wonder" or "awe," a "fear that trembles at the threshold of approach, and does not flee through the exit door."¹ Walking through the door is the birthplace of wisdom.

We are told we live in an information economy. We are awash in knowledge. We have no real need to remember now. Google will do it for us. We have the world at our fingertips, literally. Never have so many had access to so much of the world's information.

But wisdom? Wisdom that displaces the ego and ushers in compassion and kindness? Wisdom that calls into question our tendency to idolatry, refusing to bow to the idea that one person, or party, or ideology possesses all that there is to know of the truth? Wisdom that trembles in reverence, awe, and wonder before the One who made us? Wisdom that recognizes the importance of integrity and honesty before expediency? Wisdom that knows what it does not know, that tears down all the little gods we build for the sake of the One God, who is Holy Mystery, awesome in power and love toward us? We are awash in knowledge, but wisdom often seems in short supply.

¹ William Brown, *Sacred Sense: Discovering the Wonder of God's Word and World*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015), page 9.

This is what God seeks to form in us – the fear of the LORD, the beginning of wisdom.

As you worship today in this company of God's children, notice the words you have no need to look at the bulletin to say. Those words are a story buried deep within. Treasure the wisdom that seeks to be born through that story. When memory fades, when times grow weary, when trouble arises, may those words rise up in you, holy and awesome, and give you a strength, give us as a congregation a strength, we didn't know we had, to the glory of God. Amen.