

“God of the Storm”

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Umstead Park United Church of Christ

Psalm 29

I grew up in The Church... which is to say, I grew up IN church... More specifically, when I was a child, it was very unusual for me not to be in church on any given Sunday. (We here this morning grew up in many traditions, or no tradition in religious terms, but ... I'm not trying to put you on the spot and this is not a quiz you'll be penalized on but... how about a show of hands for how many of you, like me, were in church almost every Sunday as a child?)

For those of you even more like me, which is to say you grew up in a Baptist Church, Sunday School was perhaps where we learned more about the foundational stories of the Bible than any other place. (I've heard from some of you that grew up Catholic that that wasn't so much the case... that the Bible wasn't all that emphasized... yes?)

But it was in Sunday School, Church School in some circles... that I/we learned about David and Goliath, Mary and Martha, Adam and Eve, Abraham and Isaac, even Ruth and Naomi.... And Jesus, of course.

Moses, Noah, Jacob, Paul, the Good Samaritan, the Prodigal Son, Shadrach, Meshach, To-bed-we-go (I've already put some of you to sleep)... there are a lot of stories in the Bible!

And many of them make great children's stories... on some basic level. ...Most of them make excellent stories for adults as well... ***but on a different level than we learned them as children.***

Children and Bible stories... It's always tricky as to what level of the story, what part of the meaning they are ready for-

I remember a few years ago now when we held a more traditional Vacation Church School.

The children rotated from module to module... one was crafts, one drama, one bible stories ... A particular third grader was in the 'Stories from the Bible' module and she and her group heard a story together. Upon hearing from the Holy Scriptures another child responded, "That doesn't make any sense!" To which our third grader, whose father was a chaplain at a nearby University, is said to have comforted the other by saying:

"There's a lot of stuff that doesn't make sense in the Bible."

...That was the same VCS where TJ and Justine were leaders, too. So another of our children, 6 years old, was excited when TJ and Justine (Justine was dressed up to appear as God.) ... when TJ and Justine explained that they were going to tell the children the story of Creation. The 6 yr. old child excitedly responded. "Oh, you're going to tell us about the Big Bang?!"

"No," TJ said, "we're going to tell you about the story of Creation from the Bible."

...and they went on to read Genesis One... "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth... and the earth was without form, and there was darkness over the deep. And God's spirit hovered over the darkness."

At the end of the evening all the children came together for a wrap-up session and the leader asked them some of the things they learned. TJ and Justine's student immediately raised his hand and explained: "We learned about the Creation of the world without the facts."

...without the facts!

Very challenging... this teacher task?!

Last Sunday in worship we recognized the teachers of our children here at UPUCC as it was the official 'Move Up Sunday' for our children transitioning from one age group and class to the next... but can I give another shout-out today to all the adults who are working with our children? What a wonderful, and **brave** thing you are doing.

We rearranged our staff this fall and Peg Arcari is **coordinating** all sorts of resources and people on our children's behalf... and doing a wonderful job... and I've jumped in, along with Greg Howes and now Mary Nations to coordinate some work with our youth.

I use the word '**coordinate**' specifically for both children and youth leadership because there are many, many more people involved than even the teachers or committee members that shepherd the programs. In a sense, all of you are part of our children and youth programs as well. ...and I'm not just talking about the ones of you that provide the meals or transportation or assist with a class or help with a fund raiser. You see, in a broader and more foundational way, you make up the sea they swim in here. You are the air they breathe... this congregation the building they live in... and therefore what you do and what you say and what they see and what they hear shapes them. I don't mean to make you nervous... it's just true. Children pick up the 'vibe' of the place and people they live and move among.

I thought about that this past Sunday evening when I assisted Greg Howes with a 'Youth Olympics.' Greg is not here today so I can talk freely about him. Greg is, to put it succinctly, the oldest kid in the church. ...and he has been a wonderful leader for our youth for the past several years attending countless Sunday evening programs and chaperoning many weeks of John's River work camps and trips to New York and most recently with some of our older youth as well as several adults to Guatemala.

So last Sunday evening we hosted a Youth Olympics as a fall kick-off for our Middle and High School Youth. Olympics/kick-off, I know I'm mixing metaphors, but Greg was in charge so that mix is pretty appropriate. Eating ice cream and cookies the fastest relay-style, chugging fizzy water, throwing water balloons in a middle school vs. high school frenzy. No one was hurt... no one even threw up, that I'm aware of.

And Greg looked to me for the last event and said to the youth, "Ok... Now for the final and gold medal deciding opportunity, you're going to answer questions about the Bible."

I was to ask the questions while the youth huddled into two groups to divine the answers and then report. (Well, I have to admit that one stood to the side and offered the same answer to every question.)...

Did you hear the story about the time with children when all the children come forward in worship and the minister greeted them and said, "You know I saw a furry little gray thing with a

tail running across the street this morning. And then it took an acorn in little paws and nibbled at it and then it ran up a tree. Do you know what that was?"

And a kid replies "Jesus."

There's one in every crowd.

Well last Sunday we had that one, too.

Trying to make the questions easy enough they *might* know the answer but hard enough they wouldn't be completely obvious I asked... What's the third book in the Bible?

"Jesus," said the one.

"Leviticus?" offered the Middle Schoolers (and they were right).

"Deuteronomy," said the older youth.

"Oh, that's the *next* book," an observing adult consoled them.

Devious soul that I am, I followed with "What's the 5th book of the Bible?"

...and that's Deuteronomy.

And though they could fill in the blank on John 1:1 "In the beginning was the ____"

And knew the last book in the Bible. (Save the one who offered "Jesus" as the answer.).

They weren't sure at all who was reported as the oldest man... Methuselah

Which gospel contains the famous parable of Jesus... the Good Samaritan (Luke).

Or even vaguely knew how many books the Bible contained.

"Hey," said one of the high schoolers... "I bet our adults couldn't answer some of these questions!" True enough...

But, honestly, those are not crucial questions anyway.

What is far more important is understanding what the text means... or at the least, what it means for you.

Which brings me, "**Finally**," you say, to the text for today... Psalm 29: The voice of God in the storm. It is the passage that our children are discussing now in their classes. Discussing?... yes.

Carol Fouts and Kathy Dobbs are with our younger children and they are agreeing that storms are sometimes scary and loud. They frighten us but are assured they that are safe inside... and God is with us.

Children a little older are wondering with Nancy Wilms and Justine (TJ is in the nursery) what really causes the lightening, where it comes from, and are talking a little about electricity and harnessing the power of the storm for good. They, too, learn of God's presence in the storm.

And older children, with Anthony Neff and Sally Bean, as these children are moving toward teenage years, speak of ...the storms of life... that times with their parents and peers can be stormy but they can listen for God's voice and feel God's presence during those stormy times.

Storms, we know as adults, harbor both good and danger. Perhaps that is what is fascinating about them. Such power....

...And where *IS* God's voice in this mix for you? That depends on the storm... and the circumstances we find ourselves. It is not a cookie cutter answer.

As an adult still, if there is a storm, there is nothing I like more than to sit on my screened porch and feel it... the wind blow, the light spray of rain through the screen, and if I'm lucky, thunder that shakes the porch itself. Now, I'm not saying I'd sit there through a hurricane, but generally, I love the power of the storm and during it I'm reminded of the power of nature and all creation thereby the Creator... the Divine.

In Psalm 29, the Hebrew writer celebrates such renewing power.

Bravo, God (Peterson translates it) Bravo! All angels shout, "Encore!"

Do it again, God!!!

(That was a great thunderclap. That was magnificent lightening.)

...and lest you think the writer too superficial... that there is some sort of thunderbolt flinging in a literal sense, hear this closing lines again... the last two sentences.

Above the floodwaters is God's throne from which power flows, from which God rules the world.

God makes the people strong. God gives the people peace.

You see, the world, as the Hebrews understood it, their 'scientific' understanding, if you will, consisted of waters surrounding everything they knew. Waters below and waters above. The rains came down from the waters above. The floods rose up from the waters below. ...and in between there was a vaulted space where God separated the waters (oceans) from the land... earth. It was God that brought order to this chaos and God that keeps the seething waters at bay.

In the epic poem of creation, Genesis 1, this was one of the first things God did. In fact, it was day two of the seven-day creation story.

Do you remember?

I'll remind you:

And God said, "Let there be a vault between the waters to separate water from water."

So God made the vault and separated the water under the vault from the water above it.

And it was so.

God called the vault "sky." And there was evening, and there was morning—the second day.

The seething waters are now kept at bay... but the storms of life still persist.

The storms of life...

Sometimes we pray for safety *from* the storm...

From Seasons of the Spirit (paraphrased): Storms...

... Syrian, Iraqi, women, orphaned, old, war-broken and ravaged, on the move, seeking refuge at closed borders, vilified – [we] turn to God. Our prayer is for strength, consolation, a safe haven. [...and those] subjugated by empire, shackled by debt, underemployed, and heavily burdened, turn to God. ...

We can face the forces arrayed against us, withstand the full force of the oppressive, mighty waters. We vibrate with God's force and energy, letting God's voice penetrate our entire being, allowing God to speak in, and through, us.

And importantly, by letting God's voice take form in us as action in the world. When we hear the shout from others, "We are perishing!" We do not stand idly by. We rebuke the storm and then give safe haven for those caught in its raging waves.

Sometimes, you see, as the choir sang to us we pray *for* a gentle storm

Gratitude (greatly abridged words) Nichole Nordeman

Send some rain, send some rain

'Cause the earth is dry

send some mercy down

But if not...

We'll give thanks to You [God]

With gratitude

For lessons learned in how to thirst for You

How to bless the very sun that warms our face

Give us daily bread

Fill our cups,

Wrap us up and warm us with sturdy roofs over head

And if not

We'll give thanks to You

With gratitude

A lesson learned to hunger after You

That a starry sky offers a better view if no roof is overhead

So grant us peace,

And if we don't feel peace we'll feel gratitude that you teach us to trust

Where is God's voice in the storm for you?

Again... from Psalm 29:

Bravo, God, bravo! All angels shout, "Encore!"

...We fall to our knees - we call out, "Glory!"

Above the floodwaters is God's throne from which power flows

...God makes the people strong. God gives the people peace.

-The Message (slightly altered for inclusive language)

Such peace be with you in and through the storm.

Amen.