

“Wide-Open Spaces”

Sermon from Psalm 18:6-19

Given Sunday, September 5, 2021

for the First Baptist Church of McMinnville

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*In my distress I called you, God; to you, my God, I cried for help.
From your temple you heard my voice,
and my cry to you reached your ears.*

*Then the netherworld reeled and rocked; the mountains trembled
to their foundations in the presence of your anger.
Smoke billowed from your nostrils
and a consuming fire spewed forth from your mouth;
glowing coals erupted into flames.
You tore through the heavens and came down;
thick darkness was under your feet.
You rode on the backs of cherubim,
and soared on the wings of the wind.
You made the night your cloak;
you covered yourself in a canopy of storm clouds.
From the brightness before you, your clouds
surged forth with hailstones and lightning bolts.
You thundered in the heavens and your voice,
Most High, resounded with hailstones and bolts of lightning.*

*You shot your arrows and scattered my enemies;
you scattered your lightning bolts and routed them.
Then the clouds of the sea were exposed,
and the foundations of the world were laid bare
at your rebuke, God, at a snort from your nostrils.*

*You reached from on high and took hold of me,
and pulled me out of deep water.
You rescued me from my strong enemy,
and from foes who were too powerful for me.
They fell upon me in the day of my calamity,
but you, God, were my support.
You brought me out of the netherworld into a broad place -
you rescued me, because you delighted in me.*

—

There are several reasons we chose the Inclusive Bible as the version we read from in worship. The translators of this version are called Priests for Equality, and they set out with a commitment to inclusive language, which, for these purposes, means they don't write "men" when what's meant is "people;" they don't write "brothers" when what's meant is "siblings;" and they celebrate the variety of images of God that the original scripture employed, instead of simplifying that complexity down. Another benefit is that it's not as well-known as some other translations, not as familiar, so even in readings some of us think we know, we'll hear a new perspective.

And while this reading for today isn't one I can say I grew up hearing or even recognized it when I came across it again, I was struck first just by one idea that appears in this particular translation: this Psalm comes to us *from the netherworld*.

I'll confess I only know about the nether because my eleven- and thirteen-year-old sons play a lot of Minecraft - this video game where they build homes and boats and collect redstone and if you feed a chicken it will follow you for the rest of the game. It all seems pretty pleasant, it's a creative endeavor, but within this game, there is a place called the nether. I feel like they try to stay away from that place.

So I asked my oldest, over text one day, to tell me about it. I said, "hey, I'm preaching about this Psalm where they guy calls out to God from the netherworld."

And my kid said, “Oh no.” He said, “Blessings be upon you.”

And I said, “What do I need to know?”

And he said, “Avoid the blaze. Avoid the bastions.”

And I said, “What are bastions? And is the blaze fire?”

He said, “Bastions are ruined piglin castles. A piglin is a pig with a sword. It is evil. The blaze is living fire.”

I said, “Oh dear.”

He said, “Bring gold to trade. Find netherite - that’s like very hard rocks that you wear as clothes. It will protect you.”

I said, “Thank you. Now maybe I will survive this sermon-writing process.”

He said, “It will take months.”

I said, “But I’m preaching this Sunday.”

He said, “Oh gosh. Just avoid the ghost fireballs while bridging over the lava sea.”

So... don’t say I didn’t warn you. :)

We do probably need to talk about the image of God in these verses, right? It’s intense. And a little bit scary. Or... a lot scary. This isn’t a story of God coming in and making a mess of things

because God is angry. This is an image of God overturning, uncovering the very foundations of the world because God's beloved is in distress, is under attack. I think back to our work with Psalm 23 a few months, thinking about that table God prepares for us in the presence of our enemies, and I remember acknowledgement that most of us are not kings with armies marching in from afar, plotting to destroy us. Our enemies, mostly, live a lot closer than that - like inside our heads, inside our hearts, lying to us about ourselves, feeding us doubts and suspicions about our world, and our loves, and our God.

And this God who made us for more than that, for better than that, this God summons all the divine energy and power here to say *no*. God comes here with a tremendous entrance - it's theatrical and it's fantastical and it's got all the makings of a summer blockbuster superhero movie. God hears the cry of a beloved and every bit of God's being is activated to protect and to rescue - lightning and thunder and smoke and a hand that reaches in to save.

Even still - this Psalm isn't really about God's power. This reading begins in relationship, right? There are 30 words in verse 6 - *In my distress I called you, God; to you, my God, I cried for help. From your temple you heard my voice, and my cry to you reached your ears* - thirty words and more than one-third of them are "I" or "my" or "you" or "yours." That many relational words is completely unnecessary. The verse becomes clunky with the repetition. But it's to say that God and this Psalmist are with and for each other. And here God says, "I will remake the world so that you can thrive."

And then here's what God does as rescue: God remakes not the world but the beloved one. By just switching scenes. By creating a new context. God brings the one in danger into a wide-open space. Says: here. Breathe.

A wide open space is sometimes not our instinct, or mine, at least. Sometimes I want to be small, and surrounded, and protected. When I'm in the passenger seat of a car, I'll often put my backpack at my feet, my purse there, too, a stack of books on my lap. Whoever's driving will say, "Uh, you know, there's a trunk," but something in me feels safe when stuff is all piled up around me.

I'm not, really. It's just a trick I play on myself.

What makes you feel safe?

These two artists in Russia, Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid, in 1993 they commissioned a ten-country survey about the kinds of art people liked to look at. They were curious about favorite colors and styles and subject matters. As kind of a final project, they created a "Most Wanted" painting for each country, that was a sort of visual summary of the responses they got. And the paintings are maybe not very good, in and of themselves, but they reveal some really interesting commonalities.

Ingrid Fetell Lee, who tells about this in her book *Joyful*, writes that "from China to Turkey to Iceland to Kenya, they all depict landscapes. In fact, they all depict the same landscape." She writes, "With few exceptions, the 'Most Wanted' paintings show pleasant outdoor scenes centered on grassy areas with scattered

bits of trees and plenty of blue sky. There are moderate hills and bodies of water, a few scattered animals and people.”

And some people say, “well, sure.” Landscapes are ubiquitous. Famous landscape paintings are reproduced on cheap posters and wall calendars that hang in homes all around the world. What we’re seeing are the results of an aesthetic imperialism. Maybe.

But Lee says evolutionary theorists see a different significance in these paintings. They connect the scene to real-life landscapes, like English gardens, like New York City parks. People work to transform their own native areas into landscapes like this. But what they all harken back to is this place many of us have never been, they say: the East African savannah.

It’s wide, with rolling grasslands, small clusters of trees, an endless sightline. It was a significant habitat for early humanity. Access to food close to the ground. Ability to see both predators and prey. Broad vistas mean prospect, accessible shelter means refuge. The acacia tree in the savanna is shaped like an umbrella - that’s a shape people around the world prune other kinds of trees to resemble. All of it hearkening back to our earliest ancestors. To the wide-open places we come from.

I think of Maria, in the opening scene of *The Sound of Music*, her arms spread to embrace that landscape; she sings that the hills are alive but it’s clear what she’s saying is that she is, too.

I think of the folks - like lots of us - who make their way often to the Oregon coast, some of them surfers, some of them looking for clams, but lots of them just to walk it, just to sit, just to watch the

waves roll in and out, to listen to the rhythm, to look out over that expanse to where blue meets blue.

However much it might seem like it these days, the nether is not our natural habitat. We were not created to dodge ghost fireballs over a lava sea or battle with pigs wielding swords. And however protected we might feel when we surround ourselves with what's comfortable, we're not actually safe there either. Where we come from, and the place we're rescued for, is wide open. We don't know all that's out there, but this story we've inherited says that God - who delights in us, because God delights in us - will scoop us out of our crowded places and set us down somewhere new, so that that wide openness might be not just in our landscapes, but in our minds, in our hearts. May it be so.