

Sermon – October 22, 2023

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Psalm 96

Many of the funerals and most of the weddings I've performed at this church have been for people who aren't part of First Parish. Of those, a fair portion of the folks I've worked with aren't particularly religious. There's any *number* of good reasons why someone who's not a churchgoer would still want to be married at First Parish or have a funeral for their loved one here. But regardless of what brought them here or why organized religion isn't a part of their lives, the vast majority of them express the same sentiment: all else aside, they *want* there to be a higher power. Something bigger than them, some deeper meaning to the universe... something *more* than *this*. Having the *idea* of a higher power in your heart... can provide a source of comfort, a source of moral or ethical grounding, and even a much-needed impetus for growth. After all, if you increase the size of the tank a *goldfish* lives in, that goldfish'll grow a *lot* bigger than you'd think. When we open our hearts to the idea of a higher power, the whole *world* starts to get bigger... but also that world feels a little less *empty* and *cold* than it did before.

It also means we have the opportunity to be a *part* of something bigger than *ourselves*—that no matter *how* big the world may be, we don't *have* to be insignificant. What we *do* matters, even *beyond* the brief time on this Earth that people remember our name. Something out there... something in *here*... always remembers our name, and all the work we've done.

The Abrahamic faiths—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—all recognize that *that* something, that higher power—whether we call it God or Allah or Adonai Eloheinu—that higher power is great and worthy of worship. And I think our reading for today, this Psalm of Praise, identifies two reasons why that is: why God is *worthy* of worship. Because God just *existing* might not be enough of a *reason* for you, especially in light of some of the things going on around you in God's *world*. But the Psalm we just read highlights *two* things: what God *has* done, and what God is on the road to doing. So I want to look at those two points, and then ask the question: what form will your worship take? Or to put it in Psalmist-terms, what song is God singing to the *world*, and what *new* song will you sing back?

In the Bible a call to “sing a new song” goes out to “commemorate new evidence of God's rule.” God has *done* something *wonderful* and new... *or* our eyes have finally *opened* to something God *has* done or has been *doing* all along. “Sing a new song” doesn't get called for just because the old hymns aren't doing it for the Music Director anymore... when someone in the Bible calls for the people to sing a new song, it's always to mark

something special. So I hope your eyes open to the great things God has done, and I hope you come to recognize the things God is on the road to doing *even* today and in the days to come, because the way I see it... *humanity's* been singing a lot of the same old songs over and over. Songs of war, songs of fear, songs of anger and hate, songs of slaughter and theft and selfishness and *power*... and it's high time we as a people start singing a new one.

Today's Psalm makes sure to remind us what great things God has done. It reminds us of God's *creative* work—the source of the heavens that shine down upon us, the life-giving forests and seas and fields that lie before us.

*And* it reminds us of God's *saving* work—safeguarding and delivering a people beset on all sides. I think about the human race in its infancy. Surviving predators and infertile ground and great floods and even an Ice Age that brought us nearly to the point of extinction—and yet against all odds God saw us through the bottleneck. And look at us now.

When we think about a higher power, it's important to take a moment to be grateful that that higher power allowed for the beauty and goodness of this world to come to pass. Whatever pain we face or pressures we may be under, it's always worth pausing to marvel at the beauty of a galaxy or the taste of a piece of fresh fruit. The miracle of love and the artistry of a sunset. And that we *get* to play in God's sandbox? That should never cease to amaze us.

And this *isn't* a God that's *too* big to know we even exist, like *us* with all the... microscopic bacteria that live in our small intestine. You know all *their* names? And this *isn't* a God that looks at us like *ants* that started crawling all over the picnic, which we... kinda *are*.

Which brings me to the second point of the Psalm, the second reason God is worthy of worship and the second reason we should be “singing a new song.” What God has coming down the road.

“The Lord is king! The world is firmly established; it shall never be moved. He will judge the peoples with equity.” Now I want to focus on this word “judge” for a second, because it comes up a few times in the Psalm. This isn't referring to the way *you* might *judge* someone for the clothes they wear or the way they talk or the way they drive. I did a little research into the Hebrew word—and man, Hebrew is one of those languages where they can say a *lot* with just three consonants, and we have to somehow make it make sense in English, a language that isn't even *distantly* related to it. The word your pew Bible translates as “judge” means to... “act as law-giver or governor,” “to decide controversy,” and “to execute judgment.” Some scholars have argued that to give all that a little more

breathing room, it might be better to translate “judge” as “establish justice.” A little more of an umbrella term. And when you look at it that way, it kinda opens things up.

God isn’t coming *just* to “judge” the people of the world, but to... sort this whole thing out. To bring the people into right relationship with each other, with our higher power, and with the world. To lay bare our wrongdoings *and* to help put everything in order.

See, we’re stuck in our same old loops, right? Singing our same old songs. Songs of exploitation and gain. Of manipulation and paranoia. Fear leads to anger, anger leads to hate, hate leads to suffering. Cycles of oppression and violence. Of atrocity and collective punishment. God gave us the *right* to play in God’s sandbox, and the *tools* to make *amazing* sandcastles... and time and again what do we keep doing with it?

God is to be praised for giving us the blessing of free will, the freedom and the creative spark to do amazing things in this incredible world God has given us... and God is to be praised, too, that God is on the road to establishing justice. To helping us put things in order, to see that those who enact violence are curtailed, and that truth and righteousness have all the room to flourish that they need.

And I say that too, because the Hebrew word for “is coming” doesn’t just mean that *one* day however many years from now God’s gonna *finally* come back to the sandbox. God’s already *actively* on the road to justice and righteousness—one day the pieces *will* be put together because *God’s* already *started*. That’s your message of hope today, even in the midst of wars and rumors of wars, even when things look hopeless and helpless. We may not see the shape of the sandcastle yet, but God assures us the building blocks are arriving, one by one... and faith in a higher power means that there is always a bigger picture, something even our acts of violence can’t ruin.

God—that higher power—loves this great Creation, *and* loves *us*, God’s children. As Martin Luther King believed, “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” So let us be grateful that the higher power *establishing* that justice... knows *truth* and seeks *righteousness*.

There’s *another* Psalm *this* Psalm reminds me of, with its two-part harmony of Creation and judgment.

I don’t *know* if they’re *related* in any way... I can’t actually *read* Hebrew, so we’ve kind of hit the limit of my linguistic parsing abilities. But Psalm 72 *also* speaks to God’s justice.

“May he judge your people with righteousness, and your poor with justice. May the mountains yield prosperity for the people, and the hills, in righteousness. May he defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the needy, and crush the oppressor. May he live while the sun endures and as long as the moon, throughout all generations. May he be like rain that falls on the mown grass, like showers that water the earth. In his days may righteousness flourish and peace abound, until the moon is no more.”

You’ve *heard* the song that *God* is composing. So what’s *your* new song? And *how* will you sing it?

Amen.