

# WHO IS ON THE THRONE?

---

*PSALM 29*

*LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH*

*BY: RYAN DUECK*

*JANUARY 12, 2014/1<sup>ST</sup> SUNDAY OF EPIPHANY/BAPTISM OF JESUS*

Sometime in November or December I was at a committee meeting here at the church—I don't remember which one—and I gave an opening devotional that talked about balance.

I remember little of what I said, but I recall talking about the frantic pace of modern life, about the sense that many of us experience that we can never keep up or stay on top of things, about how *busy* we are, about how difficult it is to juggle the demands of work and family and church and the many other things we do in our lives, about how *many* people today, inside and outside of our church, struggle to move through their days with a sense of harmony or balance—with the sense that they are living the life they want to live in the manner in which they want to live it.

After this devotional, someone—I don't remember who—said something like, “yeah, these are my challenges, too... We should have a sermon series on ‘balance’ sometime.”

I thought about that for a bit. Maybe we *should*.

I kept this idea in my mind as I began to survey the lectionary texts between Epiphany and Lent. I don't like just picking a topic and then going and trying to find the Scripture passages that might deal with it. I think we should always start with Scripture and allow it to determine the agenda for life and worship rather than bringing our agenda to the Bible.

As I read the Psalms, I noticed that many of them dealt with themes for living well. And I think that the desire for “balance” is really just another way of saying we want to be people who live well in relation to God, to our neighbours, and to creation.

So, over the next 7-8 weeks, we will be looking specifically at the Psalms and asking the question, “How do the Psalms—Israel's prayer and songbook—help us with these issues?” Each week will focus on a different aspect of how to live well (this will be reflected on the visual on the wall).

I've titled this series "Listening to the Psalms: Wisdom for Living Well."

A few notes about what this sermon series is *not*.

This will not be a "seven steps to achieving the life you've always wanted."

This will not be "seven weeks to a more balanced life."

This will not be a comprehensive look at the Psalms.

What we will be doing is simply spending a few months looking at the through one pair of glasses—the Psalms—and trying to learn from the wisdom of these ancient Hebrew songs and prayers as we seek to live well.

---

Having said all that, Psalm 29 might seem like an odd way to begin a series that is focused on how *we* are to live well because human beings are almost an afterthought in this Psalm.

Psalm 29 has virtually *nothing* to say about us. The main subject of this Psalm is not us at all, but God.

It is an inventory of the creative power and majesty of God. Over and over, we hear the refrain: "the voice of the Lord...":

- is over the waters
- is powerful and full of majesty
- breaks the cedars
- flashes forth flames of fire
- shakes the wilderness
- causes the oaks to whirl
- strips the forest bare

After what sounds like a long catalogue of force and destruction, we read "The Lord sits enthroned as king forever (v. 10).

What wisdom for living might this offer? Is this just God flexing his muscle?

I don't think so. I think the themes of this Psalm are, in fact, the best place to begin in any attempt to learn how to live well.

According to Proverbs 9:10, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” **In order to live well, we need first to understand that God is God and we are not.**

We need to start with the basics if we are to live well.

The philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre has said, “I can’t answer the question ‘What ought I to **do**?’ unless I have already answered the *prior* question, ‘Of which story am I a part?’”<sup>1</sup>

We can’t know how we are to live, in other words, or even if there *is* a proper way to live unless first have some sense of the big picture.

Psalm 29 is a big picture Psalm.

It is a song of praise to the God who speaks a world into being.

It is a call to ascribe glory and strength to the God who is both creative and powerful, and who stands over all that he has made.

**It is a declaration that the story we are a part of has an author.**

We need this understanding of a God who is enthroned as king for a wide variety of reasons. We need it as a guard against the idolatry that we are so prone to—substituting ourselves or created things (money, technology, etc.) for God.

We need it as a foundation for proper worship and prayer.

We need it in a culture that is increasingly characterized by cheap cynicism and apathy—a culture that has long since given up on the idea that they are a part of a meaningful story or that there could even be an author.

But I don’t want to focus on those today. What I want to focus on is how this understanding of the glory and creative power of God can reawaken us to the grandeur of God, and to remind us to remember our place in this story.

(As an aside, we must remember that the language of the Psalms is the language of poetry and prayer and as such is full of metaphor. So when we read text like this one which talk

---

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in, James K.A. Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 108.

about God's voice "flashing like fire" or "shaking the wilderness," we are not meant to imagine someone like Zeus hurling lightning bolts or anything like that, but simply to recognize that these are metaphorical ways of saying that everything about the created world, all of the patterns of regularity, all of the natural laws, etc., are creations of a sovereign God.)

Psalm 29 is a "goose-bump Psalm." It is meant to remind us that all life is the creation of God.

It is easy for us to fall into the trap of thinking that the world is ordinary, even that *God* is ordinary amidst our everyday lives. Life goes on as it always has.

Psalm 29 grabs us by the collar, shakes us, and says, "Look at this world! Look at his God!"

There is a marvelous passage from a book called *The Experience of God* by Eastern Orthodox theologian David Bentley Hart. It talks about our tendency to forget and the need to be reminded of what an incredible story we are a part:

It may be that when we are small children, before we have learned how to forget the obvious, we know this wonder in a more constant, innocent and luminous way, because we are still trustingly open to the sheer inexplicable givenness of the world. In the dawn of life we sense with a perfect immediacy... how miraculous it is that—as Angelus Silesus says... "The rose is without 'why'; it blooms because it blooms."

As we age, however, we lose our sense of the intimate otherness of things; we allow habit to displace awe, inevitability to banish delight; we grow into adulthood and put away childish things. Thereafter there are only fleeting instants scattered throughout our lives when all at once, our defenses momentarily relaxed, we find ourselves brought to a pause by a sudden unanticipated sense of the utter uncanniness of the reality we inhabit, the startling fortuity and strangeness of everything familiar: how odd it is, and how unfathomable, that anything at all exists; how disconcerting that the world and one's consciousness of it are simply there.<sup>2</sup>

You've had these experiences, right?

---

<sup>2</sup> David Bentley Hart, *The Experience of God: Being, Consciousness, Bliss* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), 88.

I used to have them regularly when I crossed the ferry from Vancouver Island to the mainland. I would stand out on the deck and just look out at the water and the mountains and marvel at the immensity and the beauty of the world.

I've had similar experiences at the top of Castle Mountain when I go skiing, or at Waterton or... any number of other places.

**Often I just stop and think, “how can *any* of this be?”**

But it's not just nature that ought to take our breath away. The fact that our hearts pump blood or that electric signals from our brain can make our arms and legs move or the fact that we can even *have* thoughts... Our bodies can be a source of frustration, certainly, but they are truly extraordinary when we stop to think about it.

There are moments when we are just overwhelmed by the sheer fact that there *is* a world and that we are a part of it.

We did precisely nothing to make this happen.

Existence is a sheer gift. It is not something we are owed, not something we earn, not something that we do anything to sustain or preserve.

We can do many things in our world, but it is at moments like these, or at other moments when we are confronted by the fragility of life—our own or someone we love's—that we realize that we are very, very small indeed.

And that God is very, very big.

---

So here, as we make our way into the season of Epiphany, which celebrates the fact that our God is a revealing God, this Psalm orients us properly in our world.

It is a reminder of who God is and who we are.

It is a call to wonder and worship.

It is a reminder that we are not on the throne of the world or of our own lives. God is.

Living well in this world that God has made must begin with this understanding.

When we *understand* and *accept* that we are the recipients of a gift rather than the architects of our own future, that we are the creations of a good, powerful, and sovereign God, not little gods around whom the world revolves, we are freed to live with gratitude, with openness, and with trust.

We are freed to loosen our grip on the reigns of our lives because we know that none of the things that really matter to us are ours to control anyway.

Ultimately, it is immensely liberating to realize and to acknowledge that we are not on the throne.

If we know our limits—the limits inherent to our creaturely status—we are free to live lives of grateful stewardship of what God has made, and confident trust that the one whose voice spoke this entire world into being, can be trusted with the future.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.