

Let the Earth Rejoice

Psalm 96

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

By: Ryan Dueck

May 14, 2023/Sixth Sunday of Easter

We have finally arrived at the last sermon in our 2023 Faith Questions sermon series.

This year, the series has been a bit of a long meandering affair. We did most of it between Epiphany and Lent, before picking up the remaining questions after Easter Sunday, with a few guest speakers in between.

We covered a lot of territory this year. We talked about fighting in the church, about whether or how the church can present an attractive Jesus while holding standards that don't square with the broader culture.

We talked about whether it's wrong to want to be comfortable in a world full of injustice and suffering.

We talked about spiritual warfare (thanks, Jen!) and medically assisted dying (thanks, Marie!). We talked about despair and why it seems so prevalent these days.

We talked about communion and why we use some of the language we do about around it.

We talked about Mary and Martha and the creations stories in the book of Genesis (thanks again, Jen!).

And today, we're ending with Psalm 96.

It's been a broad range of topics and questions. I've enjoyed reflecting on your questions in the context of these sermons. And if you've missed any of these, you are of course welcome to go back and watch, listen to, or read them (church website or our YouTube channel).

When I was putting together this year's sermon series, I knew right away how I wanted to end it.

Today's "faith question" isn't really a question. It was simply a request for a sermon on Psalm 96.

Psalm 96 is what some commentators refer to as an "enthronement psalm." A song of praise which celebrates Yahweh's sovereignty, over the community of faith, over the nations, over the whole world.

The sovereignty of God over all things seemed like a good note to end a Faith Questions series on.

And yet, I know that "sovereignty" is a word that some people struggle with.

The dictionary offers a few clues to our misgivings. As a noun, "sovereign" refers to "a supreme ruler, especially a monarch." As an adjective, it is used to describe the possession of supreme or ultimate power and independence.

I don't know what you think when you hear those definitions. Maybe you think that these words seem like the kinds of things that we *should* reserve for God. But they also seem a bit remote, a bit distant, a bit cold and impersonal.

They give the impression of a severe, regal ruler on high, possessing absolute power and absolute authority, a ruler who tolerates no dissent.

These words don't do much for me, to be perfectly honest. I have often struggled to connect with the royal language in the Psalms or in the rest of Scripture.

This could be because it would be difficult to find someone who cares less about the monarchy than I do (I tried to watch *The Crown* once, but I fell asleep almost instantly)!

But beyond that, I think there are at least two reasons for my discomfort.

First, comparing God to a king isn't always a very flattering comparison.

Israel's kings (and every other king before and since) tend to prove themselves abundantly unworthy of the power granted them. Kings tend to abuse their

sovereignty, using it more for self-aggrandizement than for the welfare of those they are sovereign over.

But more importantly, I think it's because it's not always easy to fit Jesus into these royal conceptions of God.

Jesus is the king of kings, certainly. This we gladly affirm. And his kingdom shall come, and it shall know no end.

But his kingship is... strange. He is a servant king, a humble king, a king who washes feet and descends to the lost and the least. His crown is one of thorns, not jewels. He is the man of sorrows, familiar with grief and acquainted with suffering.

And speaking of suffering, this is another reason why many struggle to conceptualize God as "sovereign."

Some cannot tolerate the idea that God could play any kind of supervisory role in their pain. God is more easily conceived as our co-sufferer, labouring to bring goodness out of evil, redemption out of brokenness. God is the salve, not the source of the hard things in our lives.

In my twenties and maybe even early thirties, this would have been me. The idea that God might in any way orchestrate human suffering seemed to radically diminish God's goodness, which I was desperate to preserve.

If presented with a choice between a theology that prioritized God's goodness or one that emphasized God's sovereignty and power, I would choose goodness every time.

The idea that God presided majestically over history's horrors, or even the more mundane trials and tribulations of our own lives was more than I could take.

And now? Well, it's complicated. I've lived a little longer, seen a little more. Come to the end of myself and my conceptions of "goodness" a few more times.

I am still quite keen to conceptualize God's role in suffering in ways that centre divine characteristics like love, grace, compassion, mercy, co-suffering.

But I have lost interest in the project of rationally explaining how God's goodness and God's power and sovereignty fit together when it comes to his role in the suffering of the world.

There is a mystery here, and I've learned that it's one that we must live with.

I have found that the word "sovereignty," like others that may cause us discomfort in the life of faith, cannot and *should* not be so easily jettisoned.

We need a God who is sovereign.

I have come to think of sovereignty in a bit of a different way. I do not think of God as some kind of stoic King Charles on an ornate throne in lavish castle serenely looking down or out at his realm.

When I think of God's "sovereignty," this is what I now think:

A stable source of goodness and justice, a powerful love that does not devolve into sentimentalism but seeks and promises the flourishing of all things. A reliable and faithful love that does not change in a world where everything seems to be constantly changing.

This is the anchor of Psalm 96:

Say among the nations, 'The Lord is king!
The world is firmly established; it shall never be moved.

In a world where things seem to constantly be changing—for good or for ill—the psalmist declares that the creator of heaven and earth is the fixed center.

The psalmist goes on:

Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy
¹³ before the Lord...
for he is coming to judge the earth.
He will judge the world with righteousness,
and the peoples with his truth.

Maybe the anticipation of God's judgment doesn't seem particularly praiseworthy to you!

But who among us doesn't look with anticipation and longing to God making the world right, judging what is evil, false, corrupt, dehumanizing?

In our popular discourse, we sometimes give the impression that there can be no worse thing than to be "judged" or to be "judgmental." I hear this all the time. "Judging" is thought to be an unqualified evil.

And we must acknowledge that human judgment often does lead to great pain. We are unreliable judges in so many ways.

But God's judgment is what the world desperately needs. It is what we desperately need.

And we know that unlike our judgments which are always coloured with sin and selfishness, God judges with righteousness and with truth.

This is good news. For we are not always truthful people, much as we might desire to be and seek to be.

Every Sunday morning before worship, I have a short prayer with those involved in the service. I will almost always include some version or other of this prayer: "I pray that we would speak truly of you today."

It is a risky prayer. But it is a prayer borne out of one simple conviction: We humans don't tell the truth naturally or easily. Even when we want to.

Our telling of the truth always has the whiff of the self attached to it. We so often tell (or bend or ignore) the truth to bolster our own ideas, our own ego, our own identity, our own tribal allegiances, our own hopes, and our own fears.

In the eighth chapter of John's gospel, Jesus said that if his disciples held to his teaching, they would know the truth and that the truth would set them free. A few chapters later, he declared, "I am the way, the truth and the life."

The Christian conviction has always been that truth, in the deepest sense of the word, is not a list of claims or facts that can be bent to our wills.

Christians have always believed that somehow the truth is a *person* and a *way*. And that the truth is a source of both freedom and life.

Christians have always believed that ultimately truth is not a *something* but a *someone* — a someone who stands over all our lies and partial truths, all our misguided attempts and best intentions.

A someone who shows us the truth by turning everything we assumed about power and majesty upside down.

A someone who can judge and forgive and heal and redeem all our falsity.

A someone who turned his body over to the liars and the thieves to tell the truth and to bear it on a blood-stained cross.

And, thanks be to God, a someone who told the deepest truth of all three days later in an empty tomb to swallow up all the lies.

And so, we see that Jesus redefines and rehabilitates the word “sovereignty.” Sovereignty looks and feels different after Jesus gets a hold of it.

As Christians, we do not take our conception of “God” (all-powerful, all-knowing, regal, remote, distant, etc.) and then try to squeeze Jesus, however awkwardly, into that definition.

Instead, we look at Jesus and we say, “Now this life redefines everything that we think about who God is and how God rules and reigns.”

I want to end where Psalm 96 does. With joy. *Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice!*

The sovereignty of God is meant to be a source of joy.

At a clergy meeting on Tuesday, we were talking about what we were “leaning into” these days in our work in our various church contexts. An Anglican colleague shared this:

I have spoken with some of our church leaders informally, telling them that I think one of our greatest responsibilities post-Covid is to be a joyful people. I wonder if right now this is the world’s very great hunger.

I think he is bang on. This is indeed the world’s very great hunger.

Yes, it is an important task of faith to wrestle with some of the challenging questions produced by the sovereignty of God in a world of great suffering. Yes, we must do the patient work of thinking about words like “sovereignty” through the lens of Jesus Christ (and not our all-too-human understandings of power).

But joy can be our calling because—and perhaps *only* because—we believe that God is indeed sovereign, and that ultimately God’s love will overwhelm all that is unlovely in our world and in our lives.

That wrongs will be righted. That wounds will be healed. That all things will indeed be made new.

The church is to be a community of joy, an antidote to the nihilistic despair that seems to pervade our cultural moment.

My twin brother Gil and I are sometimes asked if we have something like “twin telepathy.” *Can you guys like feel it when the other person gets injured or something?*

Sadly, we usually have to disappoint such questioners. No, there is no mystical twin connection that we have been able to discern thus far.

But on Friday afternoon, he texted me a link to a new album by an artist named Jon Guerra. *“Have you listened to this?”* he asked. As it happens, I had literally just listened to the album.

Now, I don’t know if this was twin telepathy or some musical algorithm feeding us the same suggestions. But we were both moved by this album.

It's almost like a collection of modern psalms. One reviewer said, "This is seriously devout *and* joyful music." Quite a compliment, that one.

The reviewer went on to say:

To listen to Guerra's collection of 14 psalm-like poetic prayers—which are as lyrically profound and musically brilliant as anything I've heard from any artist this year—is to have one's own affections for God unavoidably stirred.¹

And thus, it proved to be. On Saturday morning, as I was working on this sermon, I had Jon Guerra's hauntingly beautiful song called "Thank you, Lord" in my headphones. And my affections for God were "unavoidably stirred":

This is life
This is love
To be still and know you
All that's lost will be gained
Thank you, Lord
Thank you, Lord

With all that is within me
I want to know your ways
The light of my salvation will never fade
The riches of your kindness have always been my strength
And Christ is with me always through every age²

It's a beautiful song. Just reading the lyrics cannot do it justice. I encourage you to listen if you can.

It's a song of gratitude, hope, and joy. But it's a song, like Psalm 96, that can only be sung out a deep conviction that God is sovereign.

All that's lost will be gained—the wounds and losses of our lives are never the last word. The lepers will be touched clean, hungry mouths fed, the oppressed liberated, the prodigals welcomed home.

¹ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/jon-guerra-ordinary-ways/>

² <https://music.apple.com/ca/album/thank-you-lord/1682392051?i=1682392309>

The light of our salvation will never fade, not because of the strength of our faith, but because of its source and its destination. God is God, and we are not.

And Christ will indeed be with us through every age.

This is the source of our joy.

So, with Psalm 96, we say: Let the earth rejoice. For Christ is our king. And our king is coming.

Amen.

