

Psalm 29
May 27, '18

“BAILING ON BAAL”

IN AN INTRODUCTION TO THE PSALMS, THE OLD TESTAMENT SCHOLAR WALTER HARRELSON WRITES:

“THE PSALMS ARE POETIC DISCOURSE BETWEEN ISRAEL AND GOD, WHO IS SAID TO HEAR & ANSWER.

MANY ARE FRANK, UNRESTRAINED CONVERSATIONS.

SOME ARE PRAYERS AND PRAISES THAT SOAR TO THE HEIGHTS OF SPIRITUAL DEVOTION.

SOME ARISE FROM THE DEEPEST PAIN AND DISTRESS AND DISPLAY THE DEPTHS OF HUMAN MISERY, ANGER, AND FRUSTRATION.

A FEW ARE COMPLACENT & SELF-CONGRATULATORY, AND A FEW OTHERS ARE MILITANT & CHAUVINISTIC.

AT THEIR HEART IS THE CONVICTION THAT GOD IS ONE TO WHOM ALL CAN SPEAK.”

BEGINNING NEXT SUNDAY, THAT’S WHAT WE’LL BE STUDYING IN OUR ADULT SUNDAY SCHOOL PROGRAM.

OUR FOCUS FOR THE SUMMER IN SUNDAY SCHOOL WILL BE THE PSALMS & WE’LL FIND EVERY ONE OF THOSE EXPRESSIONS & EMOTIONS THAT WALTER HARRELSON ENUMERATES.

AND WE’LL ALSO DISCOVER THE TRUTH THAT, AS HE SAYS, “AT THE HEART OF THE PSALMS IS THE CONVICTION THAT GOD IS ONE TO WHOM ALL CAN SPEAK.”

I THINK THAT’S ONE OF THE MOST BEAUTIFUL ELEMENTS OF THE PSALMS.

NO MATTER WHAT YOU’RE EXPERIENCING IN LIFE, THERE IS A PSALM THAT WILL PERFECTLY FIT THE OCCASION & THE EMOTION.

THIS 29TH PSALM THAT WE'VE READ THIS MORNING FALLS INTO THE CATEGORY OF WHAT IS KNOWN AS AN "ENTHRONEMENT" PSALM OR A "COMMUNITY" PSALM.

BUT, AS IS TRUE WITH MANY OF THE PSALMS, THERE'S A BACKGROUND HERE THAT – WHEN WE UNDERSTAND IT – CAN DEEPEN OUR APPRECIATION OF THE MESSAGE IT CONVEYS.

THIS IS CLEARLY A PSALM THAT SPEAKS OF THE GLORY, MAJESTY, STRENGTH & POWER OF GOD.

ON THE SURFACE, THAT'S WHAT IT IS.

BUT THERE'S SOMETHING MUCH DEEPER AS WELL.

I FIND IT FASCINATING THE WAY DEEPLY-HELD BELIEFS CAN BE UPENDED BY NEW DISCOVERIES & EXPERIENCES.

IN FACT, THE OLDER I GET, THE MORE OPEN I AM TO SUCH UPENDINGS.

LIKE MANY OF YOU, I GREW UP LEARNING THAT CERTAIN GROUPS OF PEOPLE WERE TO BE AVOIDED & NOT TRUSTED.

IT MAY HAVE BEEN BECAUSE OF RACE OR RELIGION OR ETHNICITY, BUT – WHATEVER THE DIFFERENCE WAS – CERTAIN PEOPLE WERE TO BE AVOIDED.

THE UPENDING OF THAT BELIEF WOULD INEVITABLY COME WITH A PERSONAL ENCOUNTER WITH ONE OF THOSE I HAD BEEN TAUGHT TO AVOID.

ALL MY PRECONCEIVED IDEAS & PREJUDICES WERE CHALLENGED & I WAS FORCED TO LOOK AT AN ENTIRE CATEGORY OF PEOPLE IN A NEW WAY.

THAT CAN BE UNSETTLING & THEN LEADS TO A NATURAL QUESTIONING OF A LOT OF OTHER BELIEFS ONE HAS HELD DEAR.

A VERY SIMPLE EXAMPLE FOR ME WAS NOT IN RELATIONSHIP TO A PERSON'S RACE, RELIGION OR ETHNICITY, BUT RATHER THE KIND OF CAR THEY OWNED.

I GREW UP IN DETROIT IN THE '50'S & 60'S AND, OF COURSE, AT THE TIME – THE BIG THREE RULED THE AUTOMOTIVE WORLD.

THERE WAS ONLY GENERAL MOTORS, FORD & CHRYSLER FROM WHICH TO CHOOSE WHEN IT CAME TO BUYING A VEHICLE.

MY DAD WORKED FOR CHRYSLER FOR MORE THAN 40 YEARS & THERE WAS NOTHING MORE DESPISED IN OUR FAMILY THAN A GENERAL MOTORS OR FORD PRODUCT.

I THINK THE OWNER OF A BUICK WOULD HAVE BEEN GREATER CAUSE FOR REJECTION & OSTRACISM THAN ANY DIFFERENCES IN RACE, RELIGION OR ETHNICITY!

MY DAD WOULD HAVE BEEN MUCH MORE INCLINED TO BEFRIEND A MEXICAN MUSLIM WHO DROVE A PLYMOUTH THAN AN IRISH LUTHERAN WHO OWNED AN OLDSMOBILE!

I WAS MARRIED WITH CHILDREN BEFORE I EVER EVEN GAVE A THOUGHT TO LOOKING AT A CAR THAT WASN'T A CHRYSLER PRODUCT & I WAS TERRIFIED FOR MY DAD TO DISCOVER THAT I HAD PURCHASED A BUICK STATION WAGON!

AS A CHILD, I REALLY DID HAVE NEGATIVE THOUGHTS ABOUT SOMEONE WHO DROVE ONE OF THOSE "OTHER" CARS.

THEY JUST WEREN'T SMART ENOUGH TO REALIZE THAT CHRYSLERS WERE BETTER CARS.

UPENDING A BELIEF IN SOMETHING AS TRIVIAL AS WHAT KIND OF CAR SOMEONE OWNS WAS UNSETTLING BUT IT FORCED ME TO QUESTION SOME OTHER THINGS I'D ALWAYS BEEN TAUGHT AS WELL.

ALL OF THAT LEADS US TO THE DEEPER MESSAGE THAT WE CAN FIND WITHIN THIS 29TH PSALM.

YES, IT'S A CLEAR STATEMENT OF THE GLORY, MAJESTY, STRENGTH & POWER OF GOD.

BUT FOR SOMEONE HEARING IT FOR THE FIRST TIME IN THE CENTURIES BEFORE CHRIST, IT WOULD ALSO HAVE BEEN A CLEAR REJECTION & RENUNCIATION OF SOME COMMONLY-HELD BELIEFS.

THIS PSALM IS REALLY A NEARLY-PLAGIARIZED VERSION OF ANOTHER PIECE OF LITERATURE.

IT'S ALMOST IDENTICAL TO AN ANCIENT CANAANITE POEM. LISTEN TO THESE WORDS AS YOU LOOK AGAIN AT OR REMEMBER WHAT YOU HEARD IN PSALM 29:

*“NOW AT LAST BAAL MAY APPOINT A TIME FOR HIS RAIN...
AND FOR THE SOUNDING OF HIS VOICE IN THE CLOUDS,
FOR HIM TO RELEASE HIS LIGHTNINGS ON THE EARTH...
BAAL UTTERED HIS HOLY VOICE,
BAAL REPEATED THE ISSUE OF HIS LIPS;
HE UTTERED HIS HOLY VOICE AND THE EARTH DID QUAKE,
HE REPEATED THE ISSUE OF HIS LIPS AND THE ROCKS DID QUAKE;
PEOPLE AFAR OFF WERE DISMAYED – THE PEOPLES OF THE EAST;
THE HIGH PLACES OF THE EARTH SHOOK.”*

PSALM 29 IS PROCLAIMING PRETTY MUCH THE SAME MESSAGE – WITH ONE STRIKING DIFFERENCE.

THE ANCIENT CANAANITE POEM SPEAKS OF BAAL.

IN PSALM 29, IT IS THE LORD – IT IS YAHWEH – IT IS THE GOD OF ISRAEL WHO HAS THE GLORY, THE MAJESTY, THE STRENGTH & THE POWER.

YOU SEE, THIS IS THE VIEW THAT WAS BEING UPENDED.

IN THE ANCIENT WORLD, THERE WERE A MULTITUDE OF GODS.

THERE WAS A GOD FOR THIS & A GOD FOR THAT.

BAAL WAS THE GOD OF AGRICULTURE & RAIN.

BUT HERE COMES A NEW UNDERSTANDING – AN UPENDING UNDERSTANDING – AN UNDERSTANDING THAT COMPLETELY OVERTURNS EVERYTHING PEOPLE HAD ALWAYS BELIEVED.

THE JEWISH MONOTHEISTIC UNDERSTANDING PROCLAIMED THAT THERE WASN'T A GOD FOR THIS & A GOD FOR THAT.

THERE WAS ONE GOD – ONE GOD FOR THIS & THAT & EVERYTHING IN BETWEEN.

ONE GOD & ONLY ONE GOD.

ONE GOD OF THE UNIVERSE FOR ALL THAT WAS, ALL THAT HAD EVER BEEN, ALL THAT WOULD EVER BE.

THIS WAS A RADICAL DEPARTURE FROM EVERYTHING PEOPLE EVERYWHERE HAD EVER KNOWN OR BEEN TAUGHT OR UNDERSTOOD.

IT HAS BECOME SO MUCH A PART OF WHO WE ARE THAT WE CAN'T POSSIBLY COMPREHEND HOW RADICAL A DEPARTURE THIS WAS.

THE PEOPLE OF ISRAEL – WITH THEIR BELIEF IN THE GOD WHO HAD DELIVERED THEM FROM SLAVERY IN EGYPT – WERE ABANDONING ALL THE OTHER GODS IN THE UNIVERSE.

THEY WERE BAILING ON ALL OF THEM AND HERE, IN THIS PSALM, THEY WERE BAILING ON BAAL – THE GOD OF AGRICULTURE & RAIN.

NO LONGER WOULD THEY APPEAL TO BAAL.

NO LONGER WOULD THEY SEEK BAAL'S APPROVAL.

NO LONGER WOULD THEY IMPLORE HIM TO BRING NEEDED RAIN TO THEIR CROPS.

NO LONGER WOULD THEY TRUST IN HIS POWER.

THIS IS NOT AN EASY THING THAT THEY WERE DOING!

IT WAS INFINITELY MORE DIFFICULT THAN MY DECISION TO BUY A GENERAL MOTORS PRODUCT WHEN I HAD ALWAYS BEEN TOLD I COULD ONLY DEPEND ON A CHRYSLER!

WE CAN'T BEGIN TO UNDERSTAND HOW DIFFICULT IT WAS FOR THE PEOPLE TO UPEND WHAT THEY HAD ALWAYS BELIEVED.

WE CAN'T POSSIBLY FATHOM WHAT IT WOULD HAVE REQUIRED FOR PEOPLE TO ABANDON THEIR RELIANCE UPON ONE GOD & REPLACE THAT GOD WITH ANOTHER.

OR CAN WE?

CAN WE UNDERSTAND THE DIFFICULTY THE PEOPLE FACED?

CAN WE FATHOM WHAT WOULD BE REQUIRED TO ABANDON OUR RELIANCE UPON ONE GOD & REPLACE THAT GOD WITH ANOTHER?

WHAT ABOUT THE GODS TO WHOM WE HAVE ESSENTIALLY OFFERED OUR ALLEGIANCE?

I THINK WE CAN EASILY COMPETE WITH THE ANCIENTS WHEN IT COMES TO SERVING A MULTITUDE OF GODS IN MODERN-DAY AMERICAN SOCIETY.

THE GOD OF WEALTH, MONEY & POSSESSIONS IS ONE OF THEM.

THINK OF THOSE WHOSE SOLE PURPOSE IN LIFE SEEMS TO BE THE ACCUMULATION OF STUFF & THE APPEARANCE OF WEALTH.

THERE IS A NEAR-TOTAL ALLEGIANCE TO THE PURSUIT OF MONEY WITH NOTHING ELSE COMING NEAR IT AS A PRIMARY FOCUS IN LIFE.

A CLOSELY-RELATED GOD IS THAT OF APPEARANCE & SOCIAL STATUS.

WE HAVE BECOME IRRATIONALLY OBSESSED OVER WHAT WE SEE IN THE MIRROR & WHAT WE HAVE HANGING IN OUR CLOSET.

I'M REMINDED OF SOMETHING OUR SON, DREW, EXPERIENCED IN HIGH SCHOOL.

THEIR CONCERT CHOIR HAD BEEN TO A STATE COMPETITION AND ONE OF THE JUDGES APPARENTLY DIDN'T CARE FOR THEIR MUSICAL PRESENTATION.

IN AN EFFORT NOT TO OFFEND THE STUDENTS, THOUGH, AFTER ANNOUNCING THE LOW SCORES HE WAS GIVING THEM, THE JUDGE SOUGHT TO MAKE AMENDS BY SAYING, "*YOUR DRESS & APPEARANCE WERE IMPECCABLE.*"

ON THE BUS ON THE WAY HOME, SEVERAL OF THE STUDENTS WROTE A SONG ABOUT THE EXPERIENCE, WITH EACH OF THE VERSES TALKING ABOUT WHAT LOUSY SINGERS THEY WERE, BUT ENDING WITH A CHORUS THAT PROCLAIMED – "*BUT AT LEAST WE LOOKED GOOD!*"

I SOMETIMES WONDER IF THAT ISN'T THE CHORUS OF LIFE FOR SOME PEOPLE.

IT DOESN'T MATTER HOW I LIVE OR WHAT I DO OR THE WAY I TREAT PEOPLE BECAUSE "*AT LEAST I LOOK GOOD.*"

A NEWER GOD TO WHOM SOME HAVE GIVEN ALLEGIANCE IS FOUND IN A BROAD CATEGORY OF TECHNOLOGY.

FOR YOUNG PEOPLE AND – THE MORE TIME PASSES, NOT-SO-YOUNG PEOPLE – THAT ALLEGIANCE MAY BE TO VIDEO GAMES OR SOCIAL MEDIA.

IF A SIGN OF WHERE ONE’S TRUE DEVOTION LIES CAN BE DETERMINED BY HOW THEY SPEND THEIR TIME, TECHNOLOGY IS CLEARLY A GOD WHOSE POWER IS ON THE RISE.

I THINK IT WOULD BE AN ENLIGHTENING – AND PERHAPS FRIGHTENING – EXERCISE TO TRACK THE TIME YOU SPEND IN VARIOUS ACTIVITIES OVER THE COURSE OF A WEEK.

I THINK THERE ARE MANY WHO WOULD HAVE TO COME TO THE CONCLUSION THAT TECHNOLOGY HAS BECOME THEIR DOMINANT GOD.

THOSE GODS – WEALTH, APPEARANCE & TECHNOLOGY – ARE PROBABLY GODS THAT ALL OF US WOULD AGREE ARE NOT WORTHY OF OUR ULTIMATE DEVOTION.

AND MOST OF US WOULD ALSO PROBABLY ARGUE THAT IT’S SOMEBODY ELSE WHO HAS A PROBLEM WITH ONE OF THOSE GODS.

DIDN’T SOMEONE ELSE COME TO MIND WHEN I MENTIONED THEM?

BUT – AND THIS IS AN COMFORTABLE THOUGHT – MAYBE YOU’RE THE ONE WHO COMES TO SOMEONE ELSE’S MIND WHEN THEY THINK OF AN INDIVIDUAL WHO HAS GIVEN ALLEGIANCE TO ONE OF THOSE GODS.

THERE ARE OTHER GODS, THOUGH, THAT MANY OF US WOULDN’T MIND BEING ACCUSED OF WORSHIPPING.

WHAT I MEAN IS THAT THERE ARE PLACES THAT WE PLACE OUR ALLEGIANCE THAT WE THINK FIT PERFECTLY WITHIN OUR FAITH.

FOR EXAMPLE, THERE’S THE GOD OF NATIONALISM AND THERE’S THE GOD OF FAMILY.

***“WAIT A SECOND!”* YOU ARGUE.**

“THOSE ARE DIFFERENT. AS PEOPLE OF FAITH, WE’RE SUPPOSE TO LOVE OUR COUNTRY & BE COMMITTED TO OUR FAMILY!”

I WOULD COME BACK AT YOU WITH, “AREN’T WE ALSO SUPPOSED TO WORK HARD WHICH CAN LEAD TO MONEY & AREN’T WE TOLD THAT OUR BODIES ARE GOD’S TEMPLE AND SHOULD BE CARED FOR AND SHOULDN’T WE TAKE CARE TO KEEP OURSELVES UP-TO-DATE WITH THE WORLD THAT CAN LEAD TO AN OBSESSIVE INTEREST IN TECHNOLOGY?”

AN EXCESSIVE COMMITMENT TO ANY OF THOSE IS REALLY NO DIFFERENT THAN AN EXCESSIVE COMMITMENT TO NATIONALISM OR FAMILY.

IN FACT, THOSE TWO PROBABLY POSE A GREATER THREAT BECAUSE THEY *DO* SEEM TO FIT MORE NEATLY INTO OUR FAITH.

AND I THINK THAT’S WHY JESUS OFFERED WARNING AFTER WARNING ABOUT THE DANGER OF FALLING INTO THE TRAP OF WORSHIPPING OUR NATION AND WORSHIPPING OUR FAMILY AT THE EXPENSE AND ULTIMATE EXCLUSION OF WORSHIPPING GOD.

THERE’S A REASON THAT THE FIRST COMMANDMENT OF OUR FAITH IS “*YOU SHALL HAVE NO OTHER GOD BUT ME.*”

NONE.

THE WRITER OF THE 29TH PSALM IS OPENLY CHALLENGING THE PEOPLE TO ABANDON THEIR COMMITMENT TO ALL THE GODS THAT ARE BEING WORSHIPPED AROUND THEM.

HE WANTS THEM TO LOOK DEEPLY INTO THEIR OWN LIVES & THEIR OWN BEHAVIOR AND DISCOVER IF THEY HAVEN’T HELD BACK IN THEIR TOTAL ALLEGIANCE TO THE GOD OF ALL THE UNIVERSE.

HE CHALLENGES THEM TO BAIL ON BAAL – TO MAKE A COMPLETE & TOTAL COMMITMENT OF THEIR ENTIRE BEING TO ONLY ONE GOD.

THAT CHALLENGE IS AS RELEVANT TO US TODAY AS IT WAS TO THEM.

IT'S A CHALLENGE TO EXAMINE OUR TIME, OUR COMMITMENT, OUR FOCUS IN LIFE TO SEE IF WE HAVE BAILED ON THE BAALS OF OUR OWN DAY AND MADE A TOTAL SURRENDER TO THE ONE AND ONLY GOD OF OUR LIVES – THE ONE AND ONLY GOD OF THE UNIVERSE. AMEN.

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