

God on the loose: Psalm 29; Matthew 3:13-17

In the Lectionary

December 28, 2004

Inevitably, in the course of a pastoral career, one encounters that person—the spouse of an active member, or an avid golfer—who claims not to need to attend weekly services because “I can worship God in nature.” Possible comebacks range from mild to sarcastic, but they rarely make any impression. A better question is whether the assertion is correct. Can the voice of the Lord be heard outside protective church walls, in the wilds of creation?

Psalm 29 answers with an emphatic yes. With one catch: you might not like what you hear.

The voice of the Lord is heard seven times in Psalm 29: it is over the waters, powerful and full of majesty; it breaks the cedars; flashes forth flames of fire; shakes the wilderness; makes the hinds to calve (or shakes the oaks—the Hebrew is ambiguous) and strips the forests bare. The glory of God thunders. The Lord makes Lebanon to skip like a calf and Sirion (Mt. Hermon) like a young wild ox, or, as the King James Version more charmingly puts it, “like a young unicorn.” Is this really the God you want to encounter on the Appalachian Trail?

The cedars stand as warning enough on their own. The famous cedars of Lebanon were Solomon’s choice for building the first temple, and were selected specially by King Hiram of Tyre. They can grow over 100 feet tall, their circumference exceeding 50 feet, with wood that is perfumed, resinous evergreen and both rot- and knot-free. Such was their grip on the Israelite imagination that these trees are mentioned everywhere, from levitical codes of purification to prophetic analogies in Isaiah and Ezekiel. The latter compare the once-mighty, soon-to-fall Assyria with a cedar so splendid that “all the trees of Eden envied it.”

But like sinful humans, these fabulous cedars are not permitted to remain in their pride. They are paired with lowly hyssop, a small and straggling foil to the cedars’ magnitude. In the Torah, cedar and hyssop work together to cleanse from leprosy. Solomon speaks of cedar and hyssop in one breath. Midrashic commentator Rabbi

Isaac bar Tanlai chastises a former great: "You were proud like the cedar . . . but the Holy One humbled you like the hyssop that is crushed by everyone." In the end, it is hyssop that quenches the thirst of the dying Messiah. Lowliness serves the lowly, but when might matches might, the voice of the Lord triumphs, breaking the cedars.

And all this is to say nothing of the Lord over the waters. This God has proved himself before in the aqueous arena. There God's Spirit was hovering and brooding, preparing to speak the first word that would bring something out of nothing. When that something turned to evil, and the one remaining righteous man built a little boat out of gopher wood, the waters came again to speak the Lord's word of judgment against his people. Much later, the waters split in half to pave an escape route for enslaved Israelites, and folded shut to swallow up the pursuing Egyptians. And once a storm was conjured just to grip the attention of runaway Jonah out at sea, terrifying untold numbers of sailors in its wake.

The God who commands the waters commands everything else. So this psalm isn't just an utterance of awe at the power wielded in and over nature. It's also a polemic directed against confused pagans (and probably not a few confused Israelites) who mistakenly gave credit to idols. It's no accident that Psalm 29 sounds so much like its Canaanite predecessors, observes scholar Peter C. Craigie. If anything, it's deliberate, co-opting "the general storm image of battle . . . into a tauntlike psalm; the praise of the Lord, by virtue of being expressed in language and imagery associated with the Canaanite weather-god, Baal, taunts the weak deity of the defeated foes, namely the Canaanites." Anything the heathen thought belonged to Baal really belongs to the Lord, and there's no better way to show it than by stealing the adjectives of one "god" and applying them to the other.

But still: even if this God is the creator and righteous judge, not the pseudo-divinity and pretender Baal, would you really want to meet him without a sturdy raincoat, a pair of galoshes and a friend with an SUV who could pick you up and bail you out? It is an act of extraordinary faith on the psalmist's part to conclude with the encouraging words, "May the Lord give strength to his people! May the Lord bless his people with peace!" For whatever the voice of the Lord is saying under the circumstances detailed in the psalm, no one can hear it and live. If this is the voice that produced the succession of devastating hurricanes in the Gulf last fall, the only sensible solution is not to worship, but to evacuate. You can't ride this storm. You must, as Luther said, "flee from God to God," from the God who drives you out to the same God who welcomes you home.

This God, who is over many waters and sits enthroned over the flood, has himself been swept overboard, immersed and engulfed in the river Jordan. Baptism with water is not enough, for God also flashes forth flames of fire: he baptizes with fire and the Holy Spirit. Water and fire on their own are words of God that are encoded and indecipherable. To worship God in unmediated nature is to risk ruination. But to drown in the waters of baptism in which the Lord himself was drowned, to receive the pentecostal fire of the Spirit which the Lord himself sent—in this way we creatures of nature can worship our God in nature, and live.