

Psalm 29. Fear Not January 7, 2007

The sermon in a sentence: God's power and care can overwhelm anything that we might fear.

Why I am preaching it: Primarily to encourage to congregation to trust God and to obey him; secondarily to demonstrate a model of Bible study.

It's a privilege to be able to preach the first sermon of the new year. And I decided on this New Year's Sunday to try a couple of new things in my sermon. First, instead of having the Scripture reading separately, I will incorporate it into the sermon. And second, instead of presenting to you the message as a finished product, I would like you to join me in the process of preparing a message from Psalm 29. Perhaps some of you made a New Year's resolution to read more of the Bible in 2007. I know that I did. If you haven't, there's still time to make that commitment. You can adapt the process we are about to go through this morning to your own personal Bible reading, or use it in a small group Bible study during the year.

So let's begin. Pastors Wayne and Howard and I will be preaching on the Psalms for the next couple of months or so. I would like to mention three things about the Psalms. Keep them in mind, and I hope that they will increase your enjoyment not only of this morning's message, but of the sermons over the next few weeks.

First, psalms are poetry. In English poetry we rhyme words and sounds; in Hebrew poetry, they rhyme ideas. So notice how the author repeats an idea with slight changes, or sometimes gives a thought and then gives its opposite.

Second, the book of Psalms is something like our church hymnal. The hymnal contains works composed in times of great personal joy, and also sorrow, in times of national crisis, and also victory, and composed centuries apart, all mixed together. Sometimes the psalm title tells us the historical or the personal context in which it was written, so we can grasp the meaning better. But sometimes we have to research it more, or even to guess.

Third, for the most part the Psalms are intended to light a fire under us. They impact our emotions. In the books of the prophets, we have God speaking to his people. In the Psalms, we have people pouring their hearts out to God.

Sometimes we today are shocked to read the psalmists imploring God to smash their enemies' babies against the rocks. Of course, God did not do everything that the psalmists asked him to. And the reason these requests are preserved in the Psalms is not so that we will ask the same thing. The point is that we can pour out to God absolutely anything that is on our hearts.

So the psalms are poetry, each one was written in its own context, and they are a record of humans pouring their hearts out to God—they touch the emotions as well as the mind.

Now that we have some background on the Psalms in general, let's jump in to Psalm 29. Listen, maybe with your eyes shut, or read along silently in your Bible or in the Tower as I read aloud. See if you notice any rhyming of ideas. See if anything in the psalm gives you hints about the situation in which it was written. And try to feel King David's emotions as he composed this psalm. Think, too, about what kind of message you would preach from this psalm if you were preparing the sermon for today.

[Read Psalm 29 aloud, including the title.]

Did you catch any of the idea-rhyming? I saw an example in verse 5: "The voice of the Lord breaks the cedars; the Lord breaks in pieces the cedars of Lebanon."

There is another one in verse 6, which we will notice if we check in a commentary and find that Sirion is another name for Mt. Hermon, the highest mountain in Lebanon: "He makes Lebanon skip like a calf, Sirion like a young wild ox."

You probably noticed that this psalm is quite violent. David gives us the image of God as a thundering storm that starts out over the waters in verse 3, moves across Lebanon to the north of Israel in verses 5-7, breaking the trees and shaking the mountains, and continues to Kadesh, the desert to the south of Israel in verse 8. Possibly the psalmist personally or Israel as a nation was facing some difficulty or stress. We notice that the feel is completely different from, say, the words of Psalm 23: "...he makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters." This a picture of God as one who overwhelms everything in his path.

If the psalm ended at verse 10, our primary picture of God would be great, but frightening. He is the mighty king, and we are in danger of being destroyed by his power. In staff meeting we noted that we would want to see this display of divine power from a distance, but we might not want to get too close to this God. Pastor Kuroda said the psalm reminded him of the terrifying typhoon he experienced as a child. But listen again to how the psalm ends: “The Lord gives strength to his people; the Lord blesses his people with peace” (v. 11). Yes the Lord is mighty; but he uses his might for the benefit of his people.

So now we have some possible topics for a sermon message. We could talk about the power of the Lord. The storm image gives us a picture of God’s power over nature. We may also think of circumstances that feel like storms in our personal lives, in the life of our congregation, or in the life of the world around us. We could preach that God is powerful, God is sovereign, and that he will bless and strengthen his people.

Well, that’s a good enough message. But if we dig deeper, we will find much more treasure. The better we understand the life situation and the history of the original hearers or readers of a particular psalm, the better we will get the heart of the meaning. When the Israelites of David’s time recited or sang Psalm 29, what was their context? What kind of fire of faith did it light under them?

Study Bibles, Bible atlases, and commentaries will be great resources to answer these questions. So to prepare an effective message, after doing our own Bible reading, we would consult those resources to see what else is known about the text.

Let me share with you a couple of things that I found in the commentaries that will help us to get the most out of this passage. The first is about Lebanon, and the second is about the meaning of storms in Hebrew poetry.

The Greeks and the Romans called Lebanon *Phoenicia*; we know it in other parts of the Bible as *Canaan*. It was the land that God called Abraham to, and then called the people of Israel back to after the Exodus.

You might remember back in the time of the Exodus, the Israelite spies said that the Canaanites looked like giants. The people were so afraid of the

Canaanites that they ended up wandering around in the desert for 40 years instead of obeying God and entering the land.

The Canaanites seemed invincible. Their technology was more advanced—they had iron weapons and walled cities before the Israelites did. The Israelites frequently compromised their faith in God and worshiped Baal, the god of thunder, the nature and fertility god of the Canaanites, hoping that they could get the power of the Canaanites.

So now we see that Psalm 29 is not just talking about God's power in general terms. It is about God's power over whatever we most fear. The thundering voice of God shakes Sirion or Mt. Hermon, the highest mountain in the whole region of Canaan. The cedars of Lebanon were renowned for their height and their strength. They were a symbol of all that Canaan or Lebanon possessed. Interestingly, even today the flag of modern-day Lebanon has a cedar tree in the center. But even the mighty cedars of Lebanon were broken in pieces by the power of the Lord. The thunderous voice of the true Lord utterly overpowers all that Baal, the supposed god of thunder, has to offer. So we can say that Lebanon stands for anything that might frighten Israel or compromise Israel's allegiance to God.

Besides understanding the place of Canaan or Lebanon in Israel's life, the image of God in the storm also helps us to get more deeply at the meaning of this psalm. Long before the time of David, Hebrew poetry used storms as a symbol for battle. The Song of Deborah in Judges 5 is one example. David is not just writing about a thunderstorm. This isn't just a nature psalm. This is a victory chant, a celebration of God's victory. The thunder in Psalm 29 is the battle cry of the Lord, the victorious warrior.

Now we begin to see the thrill, the emotion that stirred in the heart of David as he wrote this psalm, and in the hearts of the people as they heard it. God is well able to give us victory over every fear over everything that we must battle against in our desire to follow God.

But besides a message of victory, there was a challenge for Israel in this psalm as well. Don't be afraid! or Fear Not as the King James version of the Bible puts it. They had to resist the temptation to give in to fear. God the Lord assured them of strength and peace that would overcome the baals and anything else that might cause them to fear.

Well, that is a message for Israel. What does Psalm 29 have to say to us? If you were writing a sermon from Psalm 29, what would your application be? Baal is long gone. What do we fear today?

Depending upon our personality and our age, we may be beset by different fears. Young people often fear failure in their studies or their career choices or in relationships. Parents fear for the physical safety of their children, or that their children will not make good life choices. Fear of financial insecurity and health problems plague many people, especially as we get older. Just a few days ago a man mentioned to me that he sometimes fears that he will end up in a nursing home with nobody ever coming to visit him.

We have fears for our congregation, too. As our members age, fewer are able to work on the maintenance of our building and grounds. What will we do? In a number of ministry areas in the congregation we have volunteers willing to help out, but many fear to take any leadership. Perhaps they fear criticism, or failure. What will happen to Sunday School, to Hope Fellowship, or to other important ministries if this trend continues?

Now there is a certain sort of fear or maybe concern that leads to positive action—to taking better care of our health, or learning more about parenting, or becoming more disciplined financially, or thinking and praying about how to reach out more effectively as a congregation. That sort of fear or concern leads us to act more biblically. It is a good thing.

But Psalm 29 is a challenge not to be paralyzed by fear. It is a challenge to move forward in bold trust that God will triumph. Instead of closing with prayer, I will ask you to examine yourselves and to name a fear you have regarding your own life or regarding the congregation. What is that fear? Think of it as tall as Sirion or Mt. Hermon—or the Koolaus. Think of it as mighty as a cedar, as deadly as a desert. Now listen: “The voice of the Lord breaks the cedars; the Lord breaks in pieces the cedars of Lebanon. He makes Lebanon skip like a calf, Sirion like a young wild ox...The voice of the Lord shakes the desert; the Lord shakes the Desert of Kadesh...The Lord sits enthroned over the flood; the Lord is enthroned as King forever. The Lord gives strength to his people; the Lord blesses his people with peace” (from Psalm 29). Amen.