

“Extraordinary!”
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Sermon for 27 November 2022

God has removed our confidence in ordinary means. This is because our God, **who is a great God . . . our God who does wonders** (Psalm 77:13b-14a) has determined that our confidence should be in Him, in Him alone. This description of God comes from Psalm 77; here is the setting:

**10 Then I said, “It is my [a]grief,
That the right hand of the Most High has changed.”**

Asaph, the author, notes that it would appear that **the right hand of the Most High** has altered its operations. That does not mean God has changed, however, but something is up; that unbelief, or sin has interfered with the normal course of things. This is a painful consideration—but the blessings have been withdrawn and the reason for this must be sought out.

**11 I shall remember the deeds of [b]the Lord;
Surely I will remember Your wonders of old.**

The best recourse in such a discomfiting moment is looking back, with gratitude, upon the history of blessings that are a matter of faith and record. Therefore:

**12 I will meditate on all Your work
And muse on Your deeds.**

God’s ways are not our ways. We know what His ways are because they have been revealed to us. Their holiness elevates them above questioning, and above doubt. There is no reason—grounded in reflection—to come to any other conclusion than that:

13 Your way, O God, is holy;

This is a declaration of praise! A description, leading to further praise, as well as good cause not to question God!

What god is great like our God?

14 You are the God who works wonders;

This is the divine nature, His character—God is known by what He reveals and what He does. His deeds express His being. The wonders He works are expressions of sovereign power which are at His direction and discretion.

You have made known Your strength among the peoples.

Divine power, might is one chief characteristic of God. By interventions God shapes and sustains the whole cosmos, historically and physically. It is not just the hearts of kings that are in His hand! His rule is over all. And within that larger scope, we have the incarnation, the God-in-flesh event, as a culmination of the promises of God to redeem His people. You, God, have altered the course of history. The **right hand of God** is disrupting the normal flow of things with something extraordinary: The prophecy of Zachariah, the father of John the Baptist who is the forerunner of Jesus Christ, is the **right hand of God** engaging with us. We will get to Zachariah’s prophecy in just a few moments.

**15 You have by Your [c]power redeemed Your people,
The sons of Jacob and Joseph. *Selah*.**

**16 The waters saw You, O God;
The waters saw You, they were in anguish;**

The waters are in the same state as Asaph . . . and we might observe the same state of the whole world in our day, and at the time of Jesus' birth; but the allusion here is to the time prior to creation itself. Asaph holds that salvation is a "from the beginning" promise of God—it has always been integral to reality. This promise was spoken to Eve, reiterated to Noah, actualized in the call of Abraham and acted out in the deliverance of Israel! Is this an anguish of anticipation? A deep stirring of hope, an anguish of longing . . . a longing for **a horn of salvation** (a judge, a Moses, a Jesus, a *Savior*) to be raised up! I think so. It is one with the cry of the saints under the throne, **How long, O Lord?!**

The deeps (depths?) **also trembled.**

17 The clouds poured out water;

The skies gave forth a sound;

Your arrows [d]flashed here and there.

18 The sound of Your thunder was in the whirlwind;

The lightnings lit up the world;

The earth trembled and shook.

The whole creation is animate with the presence of God—they declare His power, His majesty. He is likened to the storm god here, but this is but a single facet of His being! Jesus appears to have embodied this when He walked upon the waters, through the storm, to His anxious disciples in their boat.

19 Your way was in the sea

And Your paths in the mighty (great?) waters,

And Your footprints may not be known.

Yet His fingerprints, His DNA, His evidence is everywhere apparent! What follows alludes to the divine works involved in the guidance of God's people on their wilderness journey to the Promised Land. Jesus appropriates this role too, as the Great Shepherd of the Flock, the church as the body of Christ.

20 You led Your people like a flock

By the hand of Moses and Aaron.

Footnotes

a. Psalm 77:10 Or *infirmity, the years of the right hand of the Most High*

b. Psalm 77:11 Heb *Yah*

c. Psalm 77:15 Lit *arm*

d. Psalm 77:17 Lit *went*

That brings us to the prophecy of Zachariah (foretelling, forthtelling and praising God!). God may have removed our confidence in ordinary means; but He has replaced it with our Advent hope, Luke 1:67-79:

:67 And his father Zacharias was filled with the Holy Spirit, and prophesied, saying:

68 "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,

For He has visited us and accomplished redemption for His people,

69 And has raised up a horn of salvation for us

In the house of David His servant—

Yes, God the Savior, even Jesus, has been conceived—this is both visitation and accomplishment. The entire messianic mission in embryo is as good as accomplished from the beginning.

70 As He spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets from of old—

71 [a]Salvation from our enemies,
 And from the hand of all who hate us;
 72 To show mercy toward our fathers,
 And to remember His holy covenant,
 73 The oath which He swore to Abraham our father,
 74 To grant us that we, being rescued from the hand of our enemies,
 Might serve Him without fear, (in holiness and righteousness)

That is the chief demand made of Pharaoh by Moses under the inspiration of God. **The Lord God of the Hebrews has met with us, and now, please, let us go three days' journey into the wilderness, that we may sacrifice to the Lord our God.** (Exodus 3:18) And again in Exodus 5:1-3: **5 And afterward Moses and Aaron came and said to Pharaoh, "Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, 'Let My people go that they may celebrate a feast to Me in the wilderness.'" 2 But Pharaoh said, "Who is the Lord that I should obey His voice to let Israel go? I do not know the Lord, and besides, I will not let Israel go." 3 Then they said, "The God of the Hebrews has met with us. Please, let us go a three days' journey into the wilderness that we may sacrifice to the Lord our God, otherwise He will fall upon us with pestilence or with the sword."** Pharaoh refused and set in motion the ten plagues which one could hardly call "ordinary means!"

75 In holiness and righteousness before Him all our days. Here is an allusion to Psalm 89:13-18:

13 You have [a]a strong arm;
 Your hand is mighty, Your right hand is exalted.
 14 Righteousness and justice are the foundation of Your throne;
 Lovingkindness and [b]truth go before You.
 15 How blessed are the people who know the [c]joyful sound!
 O Lord, they walk in the light of Your countenance.
 16 In Your name they rejoice all the day,
 And by Your righteousness they are exalted.
 17 For You are the glory of their strength,
 And by Your favor [d]our horn is exalted.
 18 For our shield belongs to the Lord,
 [e]And our king to the Holy One of Israel.

Footnotes

- a. Psalm 89:13 Lit *an arm with strength*
- b. Psalm 89:14 Or *faithfulness*
- c. Psalm 89:15 Or *blast of the trumpet, shout of joy*
- d. Psalm 89:17 Another reading is *You exalt our horn*
- e. Psalm 89:18 Or *Even to the Holy One of Israel our King*

76 "And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
 The child here is John the Baptist, to alleviate any confusion. Jesus is in the womb at this time.

For you will go on before the Lord to prepare His ways; The forerunner!

77 To give to His people *the* knowledge of salvation

[b]By the forgiveness of their sins,

Giving knowledge of salvation by the remission of their sins in the name and through the sacrifice of Jesus (i.e. his atoning blood!)—obtained by faith.

**78 Because of the tender mercy of our God,
With which the Sunrise from on high will visit us,**

This will bring *light to those trapped in the darkness* of their sins—for the greatest of our enemies has been defeated! The “light” will guide and so will the Holy Spirit.

**79 To shine upon those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death,
To guide our feet into the way of peace.”**

Footnotes

- a. Luke 1:71 Or *Deliverance*
- b. Luke 1:77 Or *Consisting in*

“God has removed our confidence in ordinary means.” That’s true enough. So we are left with extraordinary things: God powerfully delivered His people from the wicked in the Flood and returned to deliver them from slavery and oppression in Egypt—through signs, wonders and miracles; Asaph reminded us of the extraordinary means God used in the creation of all things; and the rebirth of prophecy after four hundred years of prophetic silence (however abrupt that is) at the time of a new creation. This latter brings us to Advent hope.

But, as exciting as the coming of Christ is—with nativity scenes, and heavenly choruses, shepherds and gift-bearing magi—I found Advent hope this year in this scripture: Luke 15:31: **Son, you are ever with me, and all that I have is thine.** This scripture is found in the parable of the Prodigal Son. Jesus is trying to help the Pharisees and scribes understand His mission and the nature of their heavenly Father’s desired relationship to them. Jesus is sharing a triplet of parables: the lost sheep, the missing coin and the prodigal son (“prodigal” probably refers to the son’s reckless and extravagant spending in pursuit of pleasure), we are tuned into the manner in which these parables build towards their ultimate point in the third and final parable. We also note that Jesus is responding to a complaint by the Pharisees and the scribes about “them,” the outsiders (sinners and tax collectors). So he begins with a parable about a lost sheep. The shepherd finds that sheep and carries it home. The scribes and Pharisees find their place in this parable as the shepherd’s **friends and neighbors**, who are encouraged **to rejoice** over the recovered/“repentant” sinner/lost sheep. Jesus shares that rejoicing is the response of heaven, bringing all into alignment. The split between us and them has been subsumed in joy.

The parable about the “lost” coin is actually about a misplaced precious coin, but a thing of conspicuous value. Again, **friends and neighbors** supply a place for the scribes and Pharisees within the story. The value of the sinner’s soul (those pesky sinners and tax collectors) is put out there and again, heaven and earth are aligned as angels rejoice over repentance. So, why is the matter of repentance so blatantly out there? Because the Pharisees and scribes need to repent of their judgmental contempt of those whose value they set at naught—contrary to God’s perspective. Jesus is saying, if you were more loving and less divisive, you would be more able to get on

board with the reconciliation between God and man which is why Jesus **receives and eats with “them.”**

That brings us to the third parable where God is portrayed as the loving father of two sons. Both are estranged from their father. Both have access to two privileges: 1. unceasing fellowship and 2. unlimited partnership. It turns out that neither has known, enjoyed, or understood these privileges. God invited Adam into a co-vicar, co-regency, or into a stewardship position (unceasing fellowship) at the beginning of the world (in the garden) which conditions greatly resemble these two household privileges: **Son, you are ever with me, and all that I have is thine. *The prodigal son* (the sinners) *was as far from home as his elder brother* (the Pharisees and scribes) *was from the enjoyment of home.*** The father’s love (**ever with me/fellowship**) is a love that delights in his children. A father delights in meeting their needs, making them happy, in blessing them and that is what makes home life enjoyable. Remember the rejoicing for the sheep, the coin . . . among friends and neighbors, in heaven and on earth? Now sin and unbelief are two things that can cancel this home blessedness. **And they do this by undermining the father’s relationship to his children!** God would have us ever in the light of his love, trusting him; he would have us fully saved! If you never knew “**ever with me,**” you cannot enjoy that fellowship—or know Him!

The other half of this, the second privilege, is unlimited partnership (all I have is yours). The elder brother’s complaint **you never gave me a kid goat to celebrate with my friends** evokes **you never asked**. The answer could have been: *you actually didn’t have to ask for it was all as much yours and mine!*

Are you in a place of “complaint” this Advent? Have you concluded, you are yourself too weak to be a Christian? Or too bad to be good? Unable to defeat temptation? Frustrated? Discouraged? Do you admit, “I am impotent which it comes to living justly and righteously?”

Well, yes, you are weak; but God, your father is not. **All I have is yours** means I have given it all to you in Christ already—all power, wisdom, riches and even love of the Father you need! In Him you can do all things! You are rich spiritually, you are abundantly resourced in Christ actually, not poor! Not depleted and not *necessarily* defeated. God is with us, for us; he equips us. He glorifies himself through us! We are, as it were, the lights and ornaments on his tree! How we please, delight and beautify him!

You see the elder brother was living in such utter poverty; oblivious in the midst of abundance, of plenty. Unloved in a loveless home, a condition of his own making! He harbored hard thoughts of God; he was cold in heart to his heavenly father—**he is un-childlike!** He has veered off into unbelief. But the father still awaits his return, longingly. Once his child, always his child is true.

He has ceased to believe in miracles like love, forgiveness,
restoration—hope, love, peace and joy.

Salvation is a true miracle . . . everlasting life is another wonder! *Trust the One who saved you to be able to keep you!* This unhappy boy/son had no joy, couldn't overcome resentment and envy because of his spiritual poverty. **We love God because God first loved us.** (1 John 4:19) There are lots of elder brothers out there—and I suspect lots of elder sisters, too!

Easily provoked, worldly and not heavenly-minded . . . unloved and unloving elder brother, lost as a sheep in a well, a misplaced silver coin, or a reprobate sinner in a far country. Would that they might come to their senses—and you and I. Would that we would allow the solvent of grace and mercy to dissolve the hardness, resentment and complaints.

Let low-level Christians, repent, confess and claim full salvation and let them declare “God has blessed this home!” Come home to God and claim your heritage. Take up God's offer. Wipe resentment off outside! Your welcome packet is on the mat . . . pick it up and come on in! The house is warm and fire's lit. And God exclaims, “ It's you . . . it is so good to have you home. Come into the laughter, love and joy!”

Amen.