

In early December, Pastor Amanda shared a story with us staff, and I got her permission to share it with you this morning, because it's just a delight.

At the end of November, Brian and Amanda's daughter, Rose, turned seven. On the day of her birthday they celebrated with family with cake and presents. A few days later Rose had a birthday party with some friends, also with cake and presents. When her younger brother Jacob was asked how old Rose was after this party, he said quite confidently, "eight."

"No," Brian and Amanda corrected, "she's seven."

But Jacob was insistent. "She's eight!"

When pressed, he explained. "She was six, and then we had cake and presents, so she was seven. Then we had cake and presents again, so now she's eight!"

I mean...that's just some solid four-year-old logic.

For Jacob, birthdays are marked by the liturgies of a birthday. Singing the song, opening gifts, eating cake. It's these things that *make* it your birthday, that make you age by a year. For the rest of us, these are things by which we mark a birthday, or celebrate, or perform the fact of one's birthday. But for Jacob, this was *how* a birthday happened. These things made the birthday a reality.

We carry this logic with us, to some extent. There are many occasions or realities which we mark with a "liturgy" of sorts because that solidifies the truth of that reality in our minds.

Like graduation ceremonies. To graduate from an institution you just need a signed diploma. But we put on cap and gown and shake hands

with the academic dean or the principal and walk across a stage to solidify in our minds the truth of the reality that we are finished school.

Or think of the upcoming coronation. On May 6 Charles III will be crowned king. His coronation will involve a great deal of pomp and circumstance. We don't really need a coronation. He's already the king. But we go through this pageantry to solidify the reality of his kingship, to mark this transition of power, so everyone will know – Charles is king.

There's been a long debate among Biblical scholars as to whether ancient Israel had a festival in which they celebrated the enthronement – or coronation - of Yahweh. The idea was first posed by the Norwegian theologian Sigmund Mowinkle in the early 20th century. He believed that Israel celebrated an annual “enthronement festival” around the new year or the harvest festival, in which they enacted a liturgy celebrating the kingship of Yahweh by going through a liturgical drama of enthroning God. Mowinkle argued that a number of psalms, including Psalm 96, were part of this liturgy.

There's nothing that categorically disproves this claim, though the idea has lost support over the years, with disagreeing scholars arguing that Psalm 96 played a different function for Israel than this liturgical enthronement drama. Some suggest it should be read eschatologically – it's a reminder to Israel that her hope lies in the future coming of the Messiah.

Others note the similarities between the poetry in Psalm 96 and the poetry found in Isaiah 40-55, words of prophecy spoken to Israel in exile, assuring them of God's continued presence. Indeed – the book of Psalms can be divided thematically into four sub-books, and the preacher Stan Mast suggests that while Book Three (psalms 73-89) focuses on the exile, Book Four (psalms 90-106) insists that contrary to

appearances, Israel still has a king. Psalm 96 should thus be read as a psalm of hope for Israel and a challenge to the nations around Israel.

And still others say – why not all three? Psalm 96 was, after all, a well-used and familiar worship resource for Israel. In 1 Chronicles 16, when David returns the ark to Jerusalem and places it in the tent of worship, he instructs the people to sing Psalm 96. This was a song of praise the people sang throughout the generations to declare that Yahweh was king.

And it is *very* declarative in its assertion that Yahweh is king. This is a big song with a big message. In a pluralistic society where every ethnic group had their own gods, Psalm 96 says that that just won't do. Yahweh isn't just one god among many. Yahweh is the *only* God. "All the gods of the nations are idols," says verse 5. They're empty. Nothing. Totally useless.

"But the Lord made the heavens." The God of Israel – the only true God – made not only the stuff those idols are made of – wood, stone, and gold – but made that which is unreachable by human arms – the stars, moon, sun, whole galaxies that the human mind can't even make sense of.

And so the psalmist calls, not just Israel, but *all* the nations to turn from their useless idols, their nobody gods, and worship the one, true God. The call goes out to everyone – all the earth, the nations, all peoples, families of the earth. No one is left out.

And, turning from their idols, the people are then called to action, to do something. This psalm is *full* of imperative verbs, commands, directives. "Sing, sing, sing, praise, proclaim, declare, ascribe, say, worship, rejoice, resound, be jubilant!"

"Praise the Lord!" cries the psalmist.

But why? Why do we praise God? God doesn't need to be puffed up or encouraged. The psalm itself says that "splendour and majesty are before him." God already has all the strength and glory and honour. We can't add to it or take away from it. So why are we called to praise him?

Because sometimes we forget. Sometimes we forget that God is King of Kings and Lord of Lords, the only true God, the one who created the heavens and the earth.

Sometimes when we look around, it's easier to see evidence of a mighty earthly empire than a victoriously reigning God.

In a world where evil still has a foothold, we can feel just like the Israelites in exile. Convinced that some other power has won the day, wondering where God is, wondering why, if God made the heavens and the earth, he can't come and defeat the darkness all around us. There is still war in Ukraine, and gun fights on street corners, and gang violence in El Salvador, and oppression in Afghanistan, and bullies on our playgrounds, and abuse in relationships. Where is the almighty and powerful God here?

These things – the reality of evil in the world...and in our own lives...makes it harder to see God. "Though the darkness hides thee," says the old hymn. "Though the eye made blind by sin thy glory may not see."

In Colossians 1:15-20, the apostle Paul refers to the thrones, powers, rulers, and authorities that all vie for our allegiance, that attempt to hide the glory of God from our eyes. Brian Walsh and Sylvia Keesmaat, two scholars from Toronto, in their book *Colossians Remixed*, describe how these kingdoms of the world, these empires, change what we see.

This is a world, they write, "of ubiquitous corporate logos permeating your consciousness, a world of dehydrated and captive imaginations in

which we are too numbed, satiated and co-opted to be able to dream of life otherwise, a world in which the empire of global economic affluence has achieved the monopoly of our imaginations.” This is an empire full of “presumptuous claims to sovereignty”, “the pimped dreams of the global market,” the “idolatrous forces of nationalism,” “the insatiable desires of a consumerist culture.” We live, they say, in a “culture of death, a world of killing fields, a world of the walking dead.” In the face of all these things, we cannot “dream of life otherwise.” Our imaginations have been “numbed, satiated, and co-opted.”

And it’s because of this that the psalmist calls us to praise. Not to give God what he already has. But to shape in us something that is lacking. To restore our imaginations. To shape in us a vision of the sovereign God.

On Tuesday, Pastor Bernie preached at the funeral of Frederika Van Donk. He talked about how we pay attention to God, how we see God. Sunday morning, he said, was how Frederika paid attention. She could step away from the neverending chaos of raising eight children and focus her mind. And she did this primarily through singing. “For it’s in the singing in church,” said Pastor Bernie, “that the mind can see the things of God.”

By ascribing to God all the things Psalm 96 lists – glory, strength, beauty, splendour – we remind ourselves of the truth of that reality. By singing songs of praise, we remind ourselves that our God is *worth* praising.

We declare what we know to be true even if we can’t always see it – that God is on the throne, that he is sovereign over all things, that he judges the world in righteousness, that in him, the world is firmly established. We cannot be shaken. Old Testament scholar Walter

Brueggemann says that within this psalm, this liturgy, the worshipping community is invited “to stop singing the old domesticated songs of the empire” and to announce and (thereby) enact the new rule of YHWH.”

And so we are called to sing, not just any song, but a new song. For God has done something new. Vs. 2 calls us to proclaim his salvation. In Mark 1, this is exactly what Jesus does. He proclaims that in him, something new has happened. “The time has come,” he says. “The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!”

And we are called to sing a new song for God *will* do something new. There will come a day when God will come to judge the earth in righteousness, and the powers of empire will be no more, and our voices will join with all creation in singing God’s praise.

And we are called to sing a new song for God *is* doing something new. He is already, even now, bringing about justice and righteousness and mercy and kindness and love. Commentator J. Clinton McCann says, “In a world weary of old patterns of injustice and unrighteousness, the best possible news is that God is still at work, creating new possibilities for life that are properly welcomed, celebrated, and facilitated by the singing of ‘a new song.’”

Did you catch that? “Welcomed, celebrated, and *facilitated*. Our praise helps us to see and acknowledge God’s life-giving power in the world. Our praise also brings us into the very process by which he brings about this life and possibility.

For, says Walter Brueggemann, in our songs of praise, the news that God is king “breaks out of the liturgy and begins to erode the old world. The liturgy begins to subvert the empire.”

By singing songs of praise, we are doing the very thing the empire would have us not do. We are expanding our imaginations. We are

choosing to see, choosing to declare, that God is yet sovereign over all thrones and powers and rulers and authority. We are declaring that the power of evil is limited. And by that declaration, we help make it true. We take away some of evil's power over us. We place our trust in the one who holds us fast.

Colossians 1:15-23 doesn't just talk about the thrones and powers and rulers and authorities in this world. It only does so to declare that Christ is sovereign over all these things. This is how Walsh and Keesmaat put it:

Christ is the source of a liberated imagination
a subversion of the empire
because it all starts with him
and it all ends with him
everything
all things
whatever you can imagine
visible and invisible
mountains and atoms
outer space, urban space and cyberspace
whether it be the Pentagon, Disneyland, Microsoft, or AT&T
whether it be the institutionalized power structures
of the state, the academy or the market
all things have been created in him and through him
he is their source, their purpose, their goal
even in their rebellion
even in their idolatry
he is the sovereign one
their power and authority is derived at best
parasitic at worst.

And this sovereignty takes on cultural flesh
And this coherence of all things is socially embodied
in the church
against all odds
against most of the evidence
the church reimagines the world
in the image of the invisible God.

By our praise, we learn to see properly. To see things how they really are. By our praise, we banish some of the darkness.

And by our praise, we help others to see. To see past what they think is true to what is *really* true. To see the sovereign rule of the one true God, who comes to judge the world in righteousness.

And so we praise, this day and all our days, until that day when we are gathered with all the peoples of the earth, and we lift our voices with the heavens and the seas and the fields and the trees, rejoicing before the Lord.

Would you pray with me?

And so, Lord God, help us to see you by praising you.
Through our songs, our prayers, our declarations,
expand our imaginations so that we would know
that you are the sovereign God, Lord of all,
and you hold this world fast.

With you, we cannot be shaken.

When we find it hard to praise you,
lift up the voices of those around us to surround us.
When we know there is fear or sadness,
may we remind others of your presence
through our own songs.

Give us a song to sing in the morning,
and words of praise at night,
that in all of life, we would glorify you.
We pray this in Jesus' name,
Amen.