

Psalm 105: 1-6, 16-22, 42-45

Singing History

One of the best known and most debated moments in church history is the day when Martin Luther celebrated his first mass as a newly ordained priest.¹ If you know of Martin Luther it is likely because he was the person with the 95 theses who kind of jumpstarted the Protestant Reformation back in the 1500s. But you may not know that prior to the whole reformation, he was a Catholic priest. And this day was the first time he would be leading the Catholic mass as an ordained priest. His biographer, John M. Todd, describes this as a very momentous occasion for Luther. A new priest's first mass was highly publicized, like a wedding and grad party wrapped into one. One account of the event describes, "bright torches and gala feasts and a gaggle of well-wishers, friends, and family, all present to celebrate Martin's debut (including Luther's brooding father Hans, who was still grumpy and displeased that Martin had become a priest)."² Like most new clergy, Luther was terrified that he would mess something up at the altar, or the table – like spill some of the wine or get tongue-tied in the middle of a prayer. Just as he began the Lord's Supper part of the mass he was overtaken by something of a panic attack and identity crisis. Luther writes about what was happening in his head, "I was utterly stupefied and terror-struck. I thought to myself, 'With what tongue shall I address such Majesty? ... I am dust and ashes and I am speaking to the living, eternal, and true God!'"³ In that moment Luther turned to leave the table – he couldn't do it - he said something to the other priest who was nearby but that priest turned him back around and sent him back to the table where Luther would sweat and shake through the rest of the liturgy. Luther theologians would observe that "Luther always spoke and acted as if lightning were about to strike behind him the next moment."⁴ And later psychologists pictured Luther as standing in that moment like a "fragile wisp caught between the powerful pincers of two powerful and frowning fathers: the divine and the earthly."⁵ That kind of visceral fear of God, a visceral fear of stepping out of line,

¹ The following account is from John M. Todd as recorded in Thomas Long, *Preaching from Memory to Hope*, 27-28.

² Thomas Long, *Memory to Hope*, 27.

³ Luther quoted in Long, *Memory to Hope*, 27.

⁴ Kierkegaard quoted in Long, *Memory to Hope*, 27.

⁵ Long, referring to Erik Erikson in *Memory to Hope*, 27.

can motivate someone to obey God, like it did for Martin Luther, but it can also reduce a person to a “shaking mass of speechless fear.”⁶

The Psalm we read this morning was most likely written right on the heels of Israel’s exile in Babylon when the Israelites became very familiar with this visceral fear of punishment. I mentioned this exile a few weeks ago – they were collectively experiencing God’s punishment for their sins. They worshipped idols and neglected the poor, and so God brought judgment on them. And like I said a few weeks ago, it is hard to overstate the devastation of the exile in the minds of the Israelites. They were taken from their homeland, their society was completely upended, and the temple (which signified God’s very presence among them) along with the city of Jerusalem was destroyed. This was the punishment for not keeping God’s instructions and following God’s laws. One commentator puts it this way, the history that’s recited in Psalm 105 testifies to the fact that “There was a purpose to [God’s] promise [to Abraham] and the history that unfolded out of it. The LORD wanted a people in the midst of all the other peoples of the world who ‘keep his statutes and observe his laws’ (v. 45). The sovereign of the universe sought to establish a colony of obedience, an enclave of those who represented and displayed his reign.”⁷ Exile was their punishment for failing so miserably at this task and rebelling against God. If you turn the page to Psalm 106 this becomes abundantly clear. If anyone had a reason to speak and act as if lightning were about to strike behind them the next moment, it was these rebellious Israelites who knew what it was like to experience divine wrath. And actually this kind of fear was a tool often employed by captors, by empires, and by the so-called gods of the nations – sacrifices were tools to placate ancient gods, to keep them from getting angry. In the historical setting of Psalm 105 we see the Israelites as a fragile wisp caught between the powerful pincers of two powerful and frowning figures: the divine ruler, God, and their earthly captors, the Babylonians. This kind of visceral fear can motivate right action for a time, it certainly calls for repentance. But that visceral fear of God cannot on its own sustain a covenant relationship, it cannot on its own sustain obedience, and it does not reflect the fullness of who God is and how God relates to his people.

⁶ Long, *Memory to Hope*, 27.

⁷ James Luther Mays, *Psalms*, 339.

Back in the 1700s there was a movement of preachers and evangelists who really homed in on this visceral fear of divine wrath and it had quite an effect on churches in the northern United States. This movement came to be known as the Great Awakening. There was one church in Enfield, Connecticut, though, that was largely unmoved by this kind of hellfire and brimstone preaching – or maybe their pastor was just really bad at it. Their pastor’s sermons did not move them, maybe they were bored by him. I like to picture them yawning as they fan themselves to keep cool while their pastor is up in the pulpit sweating and growing more and more angry talking about fire and hell. This pastor was frustrated that his church was not experiencing their own Awakening. So he brought in the big guns – he invited Jonathan Edwards to come and preach in his church. And Edwards preached what would become his most famous sermon, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” He tells these sleepy people in Connecticut: “That world of misery, that lake of burning brimstone is extended abroad under you. There is the dreadful pit of the glowing flames of the wrath of God; there is hell’s wide gaping mouth open; and you have nothing to stand upon, not any thing [sic] to take hold of: there is nothing between you and hell but the air, ‘tis only the power and meer [sic] pleasure of God that holds you up.”⁸ It is, he explains, as if they are a spider hanging from a thread over a fire, and God is holding the thread, ready to drop them in the fire if they make one wrong move. This snapped the congregation out of their sleepy stupor. They fold up their paper fans and lean forward in their seats. There are reports of people weeping, completely beside themselves – crying out in the middle of the sermon, “what must I do to be saved?” This visceral fear of God, fear of divine wrath had a dramatic impact on the people gathered to hear Edwards that day. Well, at least for a little while. After Edwards left and went back home this congregation gradually slipped back into their old ways – marital infidelity, abuse of women and children, shady business dealings...historians report that it all crept back. In fact, historians and sociologists have a hard time discerning long-term social changes as a result of this kind of encounter with God. There was, no doubt, a stronger desire to go to church on Sunday or to attend revival meetings, and for a time women and enslaved Africans even began to have their voices heard in worship. But from Monday to Saturday, this visceral fear of God’s wrath failed

⁸ Jonathan Edwards, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*, 12.

to change society at large. This is a point that is hotly contested by religious folk up to this day, and of course there are still those who pine for the days of hellfire and brimstone preaching – for the kind of church leadership that would just tell it how it is, or rather, how they think it *will be*. There are even those who would use this pandemic (and really any bad thing that happens) as evidence to claim that God is punishing us for our disobedience like God did to the Israelites when he sent them into exile. And you know what? That kind of message can really work for a second. Evoking this visceral fear of God can turn some people to repent on a dime. But biblical history and even the more recent history of the church should give us reason to pause and consider – does that kind of fear, on its own, transform people to look more and more like Christ? Does visceral fear actually help people to sustain their obedience? And does it reflect the fullness of who God is and how God relates to his people? And if it's not that, then what is it?

Psalm 105 helps us to answer these questions. Psalm 105 is an antidote to the kind of fear-based, on-and-off, hot-then cold devotion and lukewarm obedience. In Psalm 105 God is empowering the Israelites to follow his instructions and laws, not by making them afraid, but by refreshing their astonishment, their gratitude, and their trust. God refreshes astonishment, gratitude, and trust through something of a sung history lesson – that is, a song about a God's-eye-view of history where God is the main actor and grace comes *before* obedience. Sing to him, sing praise to him; tell of all his wonderful acts.

These are the wonderful acts of God:

God is the one who chose Abraham and made promises to Abraham. God is the one who started this covenant – this relationship of commitment – with Abraham and his descendants. God protected Abraham as he and his family trudged through the desert, as Abraham stood before kings and pharaohs. Sing to the LORD, sing praise to him; tell of all his wonderful acts. God preserved the life of Joseph, who was sold by his brothers to be a slave, who was put in prison for something he did not do, whose feet were bruised by heavy chains and his neck weighed down with an iron collar. God spoke to him about what the Pharaoh's strange dreams meant and the word from God proved to be true. God saw to it that Joseph was raised up to a position of honor and power, so that he could provide for the rest of God's people when the

crops dried up and a famine came. Joseph himself testifies to the providential care of God over his life when he tells his brothers, “You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives” (Gen 50:20). Sing to the LORD, sing praise to him; tell of all his wonderful acts.

God sent Moses and Aaron to liberate the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, God performed miracles to convince Pharaoh to let his people go, and God brought them out. God covered them with a cloud for protection and gave them fire to light the path through the darkness of the wilderness. God gave them food to eat and water to drink. Sing to the LORD, sing praise to him; tell of his wonderful acts. God is empowering the Israelites to follow his instructions and laws by refreshing their astonishment, their gratitude, and trust through something of a sung history lesson with a God’s-eye view.

This sung history lesson is an antidote to the kind of fear-based, on-and-off, hot-then-cold devotion and obedience to God. One commentary puts it this way, “By focusing on God’s activity, including God’s choice of people and the establishment of a covenant with them, Psalm 105 articulates the priority of God’s grace. God does call for obedience, but only *after* God’s choice of the people and the performance of his ‘wonderful works.’”⁹ Deliverance comes before demand, exodus comes before the law. God’s grace is not dependent on obedience, God’s grace and God’s saving action comes first. Sing to the LORD, sing praise to him; tell of his wonderful acts.

For Christians, God’s wonderful works continue in the person and work of Jesus Christ in a way that mirrors this Psalm. Soon after Jesus was born, God *protected* Jesus and his family as they *escaped* through the desert and became refugees in the *land of Pharaoh*. God *preserved* Jesus when he was *sold* out by his disciple and killed under *weight* of the sins of humanity – God *raised him up* to a position of honor and power, defeating sin and death so that he could provide salvation for God’s people. God sent Jesus to *liberate* creation from its *bondage* to decay, to *liberate* us from our *bondage* to sin. In Jesus God *covers us with protection* and *gives us a light* to illuminate the path through the darkness of the wilderness of the world. In Jesus, God gives us *food* to eat – the bread of life, and *water* to drink – living water. In Jesus, God is

⁹ J. Clinton McCann Jr., *Psalms*, in the New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary series, 1106.

empowering us to follow his instructions and laws by refreshing our astonishment, our gratitude, and trust. This is the work of God that sustains a covenant relationship. This is the work of God that sustains and inspires obedience. This is the work of God that transforms us more and more to look like Jesus and that more fully reflects who God is and how God relates to us. Sing to the LORD, sing praise to him; tell of his wonderful acts.

The antidote to our visceral fear of God's wrath is a history lesson that reminds us that Jesus Christ bears the full weight of our sin. Whatever punishment we deserve has been placed squarely on his shoulders. If you are tempted to believe that this pandemic is God's wrath unleashed on us, then this is a history lesson you would do well to remember. Grace is not only the first word, grace is also the last word. Martin Luther's first day on the job as that fragile wisp caught between the powerful pincers of two powerful and frowning father, can be contrasted with the way he eventually recovered lost ground in church theology with his later understanding of divine grace. For Luther, to have a God of grace means "to believe and to trust that through Jesus Christ, God has already met all the prerequisites and fulfilled all reciprocations" that are necessary for a covenant relationship with God.¹⁰

I hope that none of the deacons and elders that have just been ordained feel like that first picture of Martin Luther on his ordination day, though I won't pretend to know what images of God you take with you into this role. Maybe you do carry fear with you – maybe it's fear of disappointing people, or fear of not being up for the task. Psalm 105 may be an encouragement to you this morning. When that voice tells you that you're not good enough, when it tells you that you'll disappoint people or the church, Psalm 105 tells you a different story. Psalm 105 tells you the story that proves God's grace is not dependent on your obedience or your qualification - deliverance comes before demand – in fact it is God's grace that qualifies you for this work in the first place. So sing of that grace, sing of those wonderful acts of God in your life. And watch for the ways that God will empower you to follow him by refreshing your astonishment, your gratitude, and your trust. To God be praise and honor and glory now and forever.

¹⁰ Hans Wiersma, "Martin Luther on Grace" in *The Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion*.
<https://oxfordre.com/religion/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.001.0001/acrefore-9780199340378-e-335>

Faithful and gracious God, thank you for this the gift of your word. Help us to receive what we have heard and to tell of all your wonderful acts. Empower us to follow your instructions and your laws so that the world will see what your kingdom looks like through us. We pray this in Jesus' name by the power of your Spirit in us. Amen.