

Written Copy: Psalm 29:2-5 “Words Speaking Loudly through Actions”

Epiphany: Jesus’ Baptism

Sunday, January 7th, 2024

Text: Psalm 29:2-5

² Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name; worship the LORD in the splendor of holiness. ³ The voice of the LORD is over the waters; the God of glory thunders, the LORD, over many waters. ⁴ The voice of the LORD is powerful; the voice of the LORD is full of majesty. ⁵ The voice of the LORD breaks the cedars; the LORD breaks the cedars of Lebanon.

Exegetical Statement

All creatures in heaven and on earth are called to confess the power and strength of the LORD God as He declares His will and plan for His creation. He not only declares what is true and what will happen, but by His powerful declarative word He makes it happen. What He declares becomes reality. His declaration of what must happen works as powerfully as storms and hurricanes do. Here we see water as a destructive force that mankind cannot fight against or stop, as can be seen in the Great Flood and how it destroyed all life upon the earth. Yet the LORD God sat above that destruction and controlled it so that the mighty power of the flood waters worked only to serve His will, plan, and purpose. The flood waters served to lift up Noah and family in the ark and save them from the destruction below. The flood waters did not destroy the ark because the LORD God was controlling them. While the LORD powerfully declares vengeance and punishment on evil, He declares protection, refuge, and salvation for those He has chosen to be His precious children. Therefore, we need not fear Him but with reverent awe worship Him, honoring His name as the One and only God.

Focus Statement:

God’s declarative words always fulfill what He plans and purposes. He not only declares the truth but makes that declaration reality. In Jesus baptism, as the Spirit descended onto Him, the Father declared Him to be His beloved Son in whom He was well-pleased. Jesus took our place in baptism so that our sins were washed onto Him, and we took His place as the one declared by the Father to be His beloved son/daughter in whom He is well pleased. That’s because in our intimate union with Christ all that would displease is washed to the cross and to the tomb where it is separated from us, buried, never to be remembered by the Father again. Instead, as He declares in Paul’s epistle, we rise to a new life lived with Him now and, united with Christ in His resurrection, be raised to eternal life in the New Heavens and New Earth.

Function Statement:

Why it’s important to know:

Just as people make promises to us and don’t keep them: loved ones, parents, politicians, we can doubt the veracity of God’s promises and power to fulfill them. This is especially true for baptized loved ones who don’t believe.

What the hearer should do as a result:

Look to the One who makes the Gospel promises to us in our baptism as the power that created all things and sustains all things. Hold fast to His promise of continued forgiveness for us. Hold fast to His promise that He desires all men be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth. Hold fast that he would never let our loved ones die the day before coming to faith. Hold fast that in even the most hard-hearted person, the Spirit can and does work the miracle of conversion by the power of His words of declaration.

Subject Sentence: Trust in the Salvation Declared by the Lord for you

Introduction

At the beginning of the New Year, a high school principal decided to post his teachers' New Years Resolutions on the bulletin board in the hallway. As the teachers gathered around the board after the morning staff meeting a great commotion was heard. One of the teachers was loudly complaining, throwing a fit actually, because his resolution was not posted with all the others. He threw such a fit that the principal ran down to her office to see if she had misplaced it. Sure enough, she had, under some other papers. She brought it down and put it on the board. All the teachers gathered around, and then began to snicker when they read the misplaced resolution; all except for the author. He turned red and just quietly walked away. The resolution read, "I resolve to stop letting little things upset me."

You've no doubt heard this quote before, and maybe even said it to your spouse, friend, or family member: "Talk is cheap. But actions are priceless" (*PPT SLIDE*). Each one of us has been let down and disappointed by the promises made by another that have not been kept. And perhaps we too have made promises we later found we were unable to keep. Parents make promises to their children, sometimes rashly without thinking them through first. But there are times the promises we made were well-intended, but life got in the way, not allowing us to fulfill them. The classic scenario is the promise to attend your child's school function only to have a last-minute crisis at work keep you from coming. Sometimes we make promises to loved ones, but then in the busyness of life forget about them. "Talk is cheap. But actions are priceless."

Then there are those who make a career out of promising things they can't fulfill. I'm thinking about politicians. It doesn't matter which side of the aisle they are on. Many promises are made during their election campaign, but then after being elected they find it impossible to fulfill them. Sometimes the problem is the divisiveness of partisan politics. The newly elected would really like to fulfill what they promised but end up facing too much opposition from the other party. But there are also those whom we suspect make promises that they know in their heart they won't be able to keep but are willing to say anything just to get elected. They hope that either the public will forget those promises, or they will be able to do enough good things to merit re-election. "Talk is cheap, but actions speak louder than words."

We all desire talk that matches actions. We all desire a voice that speaks truth to us, all the time; a voice that can lift us up and give us real hope and comfort, and not meaningless platitudes. Where can we find a voice where the "actions always speak as loudly as the words"? Well of course, the Children's Message answer is: the Lord God. But have you ever stopped to think how this is, and how true this is for you in your life?

The Voice of the LORD Speaking Powerfully Over the Waters

Psalm 29 is a Psalm of David that poetically extols and gives witness to the power of the LORD's voice. Here, we are not simply talking about an audible voice speaking words, but the expression of God's will as seen through word and action. Certainly, we see this from the perspective of our Old Testament Lesson, when the LORD created the heavens and the earth out of nothing, speaking everything into existence. But that is a hard scene for us to wrap our minds around: what it was like to have nothing at all at one moment, then all the raw material created out of nothing, and meticulously formed to create the infinite cosmos as well as this earth and all that exists on it.

Psalms 29:3-4 ³ The voice of the LORD is over the waters; the God of glory thunders, the LORD, over many waters. ⁴ The voice of the LORD is powerful; the voice of the LORD is full of majesty.

The setting of Psalm 29 is a thunderstorm. Think about the power storms have, especially that of a hurricane. David is comparing the power of the LORD's voice to that kind of storm. As powerful as storms are: the wind and the lightning, maybe the most frightening thing is the power of water and waves, like when a hurricane makes landfall. It has the power to totally change the landscape and anything that lies in its path. The declared will and plan of the LORD is even more powerful than that.

Psalms 29:10 ¹⁰ The LORD sits enthroned over the flood; the LORD sits enthroned as king forever.

David ups the ante when he refers to the most devastating storm ever to befall the earth. He is referencing the Great Flood of Noah's day, when the power of water totally destroyed all life on earth: the animals, the trees and plants, everything. And yet who sits enthroned over this powerful devastating force? The LORD. He is above and untouched by this force that destroyed all life. But at the same time, He was in control ruling over all that happened. It was by the declaration of His will that the sky opened and the waters under the earth burst forth. It was by His declaration that everything on earth was destroyed. And it was by His declaration, planning, and purpose that a pair of each kind of animal, as well as Noah and his family, were saved in the ark. The water did not destroy all those in the ark because the LORD's hand was in control of everything. He had declared they would be safe and sound in the ark and they were. He made the same water that destroyed everything else to be His means of saving them as they floated above the destruction, to be put safely down on Mt. Ararat.

It was by His promise completely fulfilled that mankind, through Noah and his family, as well as all of the animal species, would be kept safe on the ark. It was His promise fulfilled that they were brought safe through the flood to leave the ark and repopulate the earth. And while there have been storms and hurricanes since then, the LORD has made good on His promise, none of them have rained total destruction on the earth again. Here we see the LORD God working powerfully through water to destroy evil, but also to have mercy and save those He had chosen to be gracious and merciful to. And He keeps His promises.

The Powerful Work of the LORD's Voice in Baptism

While the flood is an amazing example of the powerful work of the LORD's voice and declaration connected with water, there is no greater example this than in Baptism.

Mark 1:9-11 ⁹ In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰ And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. ¹¹ And a voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."

Jesus comes to the Jordan and is baptized by John the Baptist. And as He is coming back up out of the water an extraordinary event takes place, witness by Jesus Himself and John, but more than likely no one else. The Heavens are torn open: the veil that separates the invisible realm where the Father reigns and rules apart from His sinful creation is torn open, and the Holy Spirit descends with a power and presence that has never been before. He comes to rest on and within Jesus, never to depart. And with the veil torn asunder, the powerful voice of the Father Himself speaks, declaring this human being in the water to be the Beloved Son of God the Father, human and divine. And in Him, unlike the rest of sinful creation, the Father is well pleased.

Certainly, God the Father is pleased because this is the Divine Son of God. Jesus is also sinless in His human nature, so that everything He does He pleases the Father. But what He has just done in the Jordan River especially pleases the Father. Jesus is the one human being who did not need to be baptized, did not need to repent of sin because He had none. But in undergoing this baptism He is fulfilling the plans and purposes stated by the LORD's powerful declarative voice long ago to send the One who would save the human race from the eternal condemnation each of us deserves because of our sins. God became man to take our place and live the perfect life that we could not. And here in the Jordan He comes to join Himself intimately to you and to me, taking our place in baptism, as part of God's declared plan to save us, being powerfully put into action.

What does that mean for your baptism? As the water was poured over you three times in the name of the Triune God, the veil separating you from the ruling presence of the Father was torn asunder, and the Holy Spirit descended upon you and entered into you, joined with the baptismal water. And the Father spoke this powerful declaration over you saying, “This is My beloved son, this is My beloved daughter, in whom I am well pleased. This is the powerful voice of the LORD God who does mighty things through the means of water, not only declaring what is true regarding who you really are but making that statement your reality through the faith given by the Holy Spirit

He made the declaration that He is well pleased with you because what the LORD powerfully speaks in our Epistle Lesson about baptism, He has made your reality. You have been so intimately united with Christ that all of the sin that would make Him not pleased, that would force Him as the holy God to condemn you to eternal suffering, was washed off you and onto Jesus. He had no sin of His own. So when it was washed onto Him, He took it to the cross. He suffered and died for it and it was buried with Him, never to rise again. So your sin has been separated from you as far as east is from the west. And not just your sin, but the power of your sinful nature to rule over you died with Christ too. And the LORD declares that because you are united with Jesus in His death, you are also united with Him in His resurrection. Each day the LORD declares that by the unity you have through baptismal faith you rise to a new life, free from sin and its guilt. You have been freed from serving your sinful nature, to instead serve the new nature created and sustained by the powerful declaration and working of God the Holy Spirit in your life. Talk is cheap, except when it’s the LORD speaking. His powerful words are always joined with His powerful actions to save you and keep you in faith.

When The Powerful Voice in Baptism seems ineffective

But what about when this powerful voice spoken in baptism doesn’t seem to have changed the life of a loved one? What about when baptismal saving faith doesn’t appear to have taken hold?

There was a man named Charles Hanover who owned a successful advertising agency. He was married to a Christian woman who was active in her faith and regularly attended Church, but not with him. He was baptized as a child, brought up and confirmed in faith, but then in college drifted away and never came back. She prayed for him, invited him to join her at both worship services as well as Church Fellowship events, but he always declined. But when their granddaughter was given a part in the Children’s Christmas Service, he told her he would come. She was overjoyed, believing that the Lord would work powerfully through the message that was to be proclaimed to bring faith to bear on his life. On the night of the Children’s program, as Charles was heading to Church from work, he was hit and killed by a drunk driver. This was devastating for his wife. As she grieved this loss she struggled with anger and resentment toward the Lord who seemingly took her husband from her before he had a chance to return to the faith.

Several years went by. She assumed control of the advertising agency in her husband's place. One day she was informed by the secretary that there was a man who had come to see her husband, who had his business card. She had him come into the office and asked why he wanted to see Mr. Hanover. He said his name was Rodger, and several years ago Mr. Hanover had stopped and given him a ride to the gas station and back when he ran out of gas. She asked him when this happened, and it turns out it was the very night he was killed. Rodger went on to describe how in the car he shared his witness about who Jesus Christ was to him; how he was baptized before he went overseas to fight in Vietnam, and how the Lord had protected him and brought him home safely. He told Mr. Hanover that he believed his coming and giving him a ride was no accident but was the hand of the LORD at work to help him when in need.

Rodger said that Mr. Hanover, with tears in his eyes, shared how in the busyness of life he had forgotten and lost faith in who Jesus Christ truly was, that He not just an impersonal God, but one that had come to him in baptism and had been watching over him too during the war and even after. He told Rodger that he was on his way to Church for the first time in ages to see his granddaughter perform. He was going not just to see His granddaughter perform, but to worship the LORD God who had called him back to faith. He wanted for the first time in ages to praise and give thanks to the LORD God who still loved him, still forgave him, and had blessed him so very greatly.

Mrs. Hanover at that point broke down sobbing. Once she had gained control of herself, she told Rodger how on that very night, after her husband had helped him, he had been killed by a drunk driver. She told Rodger that for so many years she had been angry that the LORD had taken him before he had returned to faith. Now she understood that was not the case. The Lord has sent Rodger, at just the right time, to share His faith. That he was the LORD fulfilling his promise to make and keep her husband as His beloved son, in whom He is greatly pleased for eternity.

Conclusion

People make promises to us, and we make promises to others. But all of those promises we make are conditional; we don't know what the future has in store, nor can we on our own change it. But there is One voice whose promises and plans we can and should always trust. Those are the words of the Father spoken through the work of the Son by the Holy Spirit in baptism. He declares the truth that we could never realize on our own. The powerful voice of the LORD who worked miraculously in the waters of the Great Flood has done an even more powerful and miraculous work in the waters of your baptism. The Father has declared you to be His beloved son, His beloved daughter now, despite your continued life of sinfulness. He not only declares this to be truth for you, but in Jesus' death and resurrection makes it so. And through the work of the Spirit He is at work to keep that faith alive and active throughout your life on earth and all the way to Resurrection Day to come. Jesus words of salvation and hope speak loudly through His actions as your Lord and Savior. And these are the words you can always put your trust in. Amen