

OVER MIGHTY WATERS

January 7, 2018

The Rev. Dr. Howard Chapman
First Presbyterian Church of Marion, Iowa
Text: Psalm 29 and Mark 1:4-11

SCRIPTURE

Psalm 29

Ascribe to the Lord, O heavenly beings, ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.
Ascribe to the Lord the glory of his name; worship the Lord in holy splendor.
The voice of the Lord is over the waters; the God of glory thunders, the Lord, over mighty waters.

The voice of the Lord is powerful; the voice of the Lord is full of majesty.
The voice of the Lord breaks the cedars; the Lord breaks the cedars of Lebanon.
He makes Lebanon skip like a calf, and Sirion like a young wild ox.
The voice of the Lord flashes forth flames of fire.
The voice of the Lord shakes the wilderness; the Lord shakes the wilderness of Kadesh.
The voice of the Lord causes the oaks to whirl, and strips the forest bare; and in his temple all say, "Glory!"

The Lord sits enthroned over the flood; the Lord sits enthroned as king forever.
May the Lord give strength to his people! May the Lord bless his people with peace!

Mark 1:4-11

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

The Word of the Lord

Thanks be to God!

SERMON

John was a friend of mine when I was about 9 or 10. He was an only son, with two sisters but no brothers. His parents had more money than my parents, so John had a lot of really neat toys. Now as you might imagine, John was kind of spoiled, rather bossy, and to tell you the truth not all that fun to play with. But I sure did like his toys. He had a lot of great boy toys; sports equipment, a pellet gun, and lots of models. It was the models I remember most. He had model airplanes and cars. He had a set of three model space capsules hanging from his ceiling, a Mercury, a Gemini, and an Apollo space capsule. That was about as cool as you could get for a 10-year-old boy in the mid '60s.

But there was one particular model that stands out in my mind. It was the World War II German battleship, the *Bismarck*. It was made from a large plastic kit and John had done an excellent job painting and building it. Each of the guns rotated around and pivoted up and down. There were scads of tiny little life boats, all meticulously painted down to the tiniest detail. At the stern there was a tiny seaplane. The 10th commandment is “Thou shalt not covet.” I confess I violated that commandment when it came to that battleship.

It sat on his dresser for a while until he decided he wanted to have some fun with it. We took it and a fishing pole to a nearby pond. The great battleship *Bismarck* sailed once again, towed back and forth across the pond by a fishing line. That was a lot of fun, but the next time we did it John decided to add a little excitement. He brought along his pellet gun. Now the *Bismarck* went into battle, because as I reeled the fishing line pulling it across the pond, John shot all around it. He never actually hit it. He just sent up sprays of water as he aimed nearby. Thinking back now, as a parent and a responsible adult, I realize this was not a very safe thing to do. But at the time those splashes all around really did look like it was sailing through a barrage of enemy fire. We had a great time talking about the final battle when British air and naval units converged on the *Bismarck* and sunk it. We were getting about ready to go home. I was reeling in the line, bringing the battleship home, when quite suddenly, John picked up a huge rock and dropped it on his model. There was a huge splash as it shattered into pieces, leaving dozens of bits of miniature flotsam on the surface of the water.

I was completely astounded and bewildered. I muttered something to the effect that if he didn't want his model he could have given it to me. He replied that he didn't want to give it to me. He wanted to see what it was like when it sunk.

For years I was baffled by John's actions. How could you in one second destroy something that had taken hours and hours to build? It wasn't until six or seven years later, in high school chemistry class, that I gained a little insight into what happened. Our teacher was explaining the scientific principle of entropy, that things will naturally deteriorate to a more confused state. In other words, it takes energy to maintain order. The example he gave was that you could drop four pencils on the floor millions and millions of times and they would never land in a perfect square. That is order and order requires energy. Without energy providing order you have entropy. Then he became philosophical and said, “Entropy is part of human nature. There is something about us that wants things to degenerate into a more confused state. That is why people like to stop and look at an automobile accident. It is why people will stand and watch a building being demolished, but will walk right by when a building is being built. We like to see things smashed.”

“We like to see things smashed.” When he said that he lost me for the rest of the lecture. I was thinking about John sinking his model battleship. It explained a little of why John did what he did. We like to see things smashed. Since that time I have found that entropy explains a lot of things. For example, this is what happens to the top of my desk in my office. I can straighten it out in the morning and by the end of the day it is total chaos. It is not my fault. It is entropy. It is a scientific principle that things will just naturally deteriorate to a more confused state.

But there is a more ominous and sinister side to entropy. Why is it that we do like to see things smashed? I think it is because we are fascinated by the things we fear. We want to stop and look at an accident because we are afraid we might be in that situation someday. Why are we captivated watching a building being demolished? It is because we inhabit these immense structures and we wonder what it would be like if the supports holding up the roof above our heads suddenly collapsed. We fear chaos and entropy and so it grabs our attention. After all, the kind of evil that frightens us the most is random and chaotic. Indiscriminate acts of violence horrify us, whether it is a mass shooting or someone driving a vehicle into a crowd of people. We want investigators to give us a motive, a reason why it happened. Chaos terrifies us, but it also fascinates us and we feel irresistibly drawn to it. That frightens us even more.

This fear of chaos and disorder can be seen far back in human history. Along the eastern edge of the Mediterranean Sea, in the area that is now Israel and Lebanon, about 3500 years ago, there lived a group of people called the Canaanites. Now these people were seafarers. They built ships and fished and traded their goods with other countries. But at the same time they feared and hated the sea.

Every year fierce storms blow across the Mediterranean and batter the coast. At times these storms can seem to come out of nowhere with no warning. The Canaanites believed that the sea was the source of all chaos and disorder because it was so unpredictable. You could be out on the water experiencing a beautiful sunny day one minute and fighting for your life in a gale in the next minute.

They explained it all with their mythology. They regarded the world as a battle ground between the forces of chaos, darkness and evil and the forces of order, light and goodness. The gods and spirits of the chaotic evil side lived in the ocean. The gods of order and goodness lived in the mountains, forests and on solid land. Every year there was an ongoing battle between these gods, and the Canaanites would offer sacrifices and worship the good gods of the earth and mountains, hoping to do all the right things so these gods would be pleased and would fight back the chaos, keeping the waters in the sea and the solid ground solid.

Then along came a crazy bunch of fanatics called the Hebrews. They had an entirely different perspective on the world. They didn't worship a pantheon of good and evil gods. They worshiped one God. This God didn't battle with the sea and the forces of chaos. This God created the sea and everything in it. Psalm 29 that we read this morning is an expression of this Hebrew theology as well as a direct attack on the beliefs of the Canaanites. "The voice of the Lord is upon the waters; the God of glory thunders, the Lord, over mighty waters." The Lord does not battle the evil forces of the sea. The Lord is in control of everything, even the sea. God's voice is over mighty waters. But God also created and is in control of the land as well. "The voice of the Lord is powerful! The voice of the Lord breaks the cedars... The voice of the Lord shakes the wilderness... The Lord sits enthroned over the flood... May the Lord bless his people with peace!"

Today we hear reports of terrible storms, like the one that hit the east coast this last week, and while we are concerned for those affected, we are not worried that forces of evil are going to destroy the world as we know it. Yet, that does not mean that this psalm is not relevant to us today. When the leaders of nations are bragging about their buttons that can launch nuclear weapons, it just means we have a different source for the entropy and chaos that threatens to shatter our lives. So it is important to remember God is still in control. God is still God. The Lord is not locked in some sort of desperate battle between good and evil. The Lord sits enthroned over all and we fervently echo the last line of our Psalm: May the Lord bless his people with peace.

Then we turn to our New Testament lesson, the story of Jesus coming to John to be baptized. The Hebrew nation, now called the Jews, had changed over the years since our psalm was written. It was uncertain that they even were going to survive as a people. It was no longer the storms of the Mediterranean Sea they feared, but the conquering armies of the Roman Empire. Their whole way of life, their religious practices, their beliefs, their values, were tolerated at best by the Roman government. They were allowed to exist as long as they did not step out of line. If they pushed back too hard, the Empire was ready to crush them all. In fact, the Romans attempted to do just that, about the year 70, when an army came through flattened Jerusalem and reduced the temple to rubble.

So the people lived with a constant sense of dread as to what tomorrow might bring. On the whim of some imperial official their home, their family, their village, their nation could be wiped out. In the middle of all this fear and upheaval John comes along preaching about repentance and forgiveness. He talks about One who is coming who is powerful. He says he is not worthy to untie the shoelaces of the One who will baptize with the Holy Spirit. This One who is coming will put all things to right so everyone needed to get ready, to be prepared for his coming.

Then Jesus appears and wants John to baptize him. Our passage from Mark doesn't give us any details of the conversation between them. Over in Matthew, John is not so sure that this is the way things are supposed to be, but Jesus tells him to just let things happen as they should. Let God be God. It is the right thing to do.

What is clear in all the accounts of Jesus' baptism is that it is God who is taking action. Mark says the heavens were torn apart and the Holy Spirit descends like a dove. And once again God's voice speaks. The same voice that in Psalm 29 spoke over mighty waters, now speaks over these confused and frightened people. This voice says, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Sometimes we become confused about faith and worship. Sometimes we are like the ancient Canaanites thinking we have to do something. We have to take action. We must be sure we go through the right steps to get God's attention, to get God to respond to us. But it is God who is in control. It is God who acts. When we are baptized it is not something we do. It is God who opens the heavens. It is God who speaks, and if we would but listen we could hear the voice of God saying, "You are my beloved child; with you I am well pleased."

Dr. Bernie Siegel is a noted surgeon who has worked extensively with cancer patients in the late stages of their disease. Over the years he has gained deep insights from his experiences that he is now better known for his books and lectures on spirituality than on his medical practice. In one of his essays he talks about how he knows a patient has a clear understanding of what is happening by the way they answer certain questions. One of the questions is: How would you introduce yourself to God? He says people who think they will be around for a while will mention things like their religious affiliation or practices, or else they recite a creed, what they believe. But those who know their time is short will answer quite differently. Dr. Siegel says there might be some variations, but the answer is usually something like, "I am a child of God, who knows me already. We need no introduction."

In the middle of chaos and destruction, while struggling to maintain order in the entropy of cancer, these people know the voice of the Lord. In the middle of everything being out of control, they know God is still God. The Lord sits enthroned over all. God is not passive but acts. God speaks. God claims me as his beloved child. God knows who I am. We need no introduction.

Traditionally in the church this is the Sunday when we talk about the sacrament of baptism, but our congregation has the tradition of celebrating the sacrament of the Lord's Supper on the first Sunday of the year. Actually the two fit well together for they are both demonstrations of the voice of God. All we need to do is to be ready to receive and remember. We sit back and wait for God to act. Then we can hear the voice speaking clearly, "This is my body broken for you. This cup is the new covenant in my blood, poured out for the forgiveness of sins." And we commune, we become one; one with God, one with each other.

So let the storms of this world crash and rage. Let those with military, political and economic power threaten to bring down chaos and destruction. We will not fear. We will not be moved. We know who we are. We are the children of God who meet at Christ's Table. We belong to the one who created and rules over all that exists. God knows us already. We need no introduction.

We echo the words that the people of God have been singing for thousands of years. "The Lord sits enthroned over the flood; the Lord sits enthroned as king forever. May the Lord give strength to his people! May the Lord bless his people with peace!" Thanks be to God! In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.