

Creation Psalms

Psalm 29 – Worship On The Wild Side

For your reflection

How do you feel about hearing the voice of God? If you have had a sense of God leading you or inspiring you, what form has that taken? Would you like God to speak to you now, or would you rather not?

Read Psalm 107.23-32. You might also think of Jesus stilling the storm (e.g. Mark 4.35-41). We tend to think of storms as bad and therefore good news would be God quieting the storm and saving us from it. Read Psalm 29 again and try to capture its mood of exhilaration at hearing God in a storm and seeing God's power expressed in this way (reading it with a smile on your face might help!).

Ask: For whom might Psalm 29 be good news?

Can you think of times, either in your life or in history, when good order has been a vehicle for evil? Hold that example in your mind and re-read Psalm 29. How do you think the psalm might speak a message of hope into the example you've thought of?

In this psalm, God is destructive of nature (humans are not mentioned until the last verse). Do you think this is simply a wrong view of a loving Creator? Or can you think of ways in which this psalm could be helpful in understanding God's presence and purposes in natural processes like earthquakes, volcanos, storms and floods?

How does the psalm make you feel about Creation? How might the psalm challenge and inspire your Christian participation in Creation?

My Reflection

In ancient Canaan, the god of storms and weather was Ba'al. Ashtoreth, goddess of fertility, was all very well but without the goodwill of Ba'al, your crops could be wiped out in a matter of stormy minutes. Because of this psalm's focus on stormy weather, and because of the imagery of the opening verse that calls on the heavenly court (the sons of gods) to give YHWH glory, some commentators suggest that this is an old Canaanite hymn that has been translated into Hebrew and 'Yahwised'. Thus the story of the psalm begins with a call to the gods to give glory to YHWH; YHWH gives a display of power; the gods call out "Glory!" and YHWH is enthroned as supreme deity.

Not all commentators agree with this. Robert Alter, for example, admits that there are some parallels with Canaanite wording (from the library at Ugarit), but feels that it is enough to say that Canaanite poetry was simply the literary tradition out of which Hebrew poetry came. He also points out that the literary device of (if not actual belief in) a heavenly court is not unusual in the bible.

Against the dullness of academic argument, the voice of God flashes forth flames of fire (v.7). Against the idea of domesticated gods who make the weather suit your small plans, the voice of God twists the oaks and strips the forests bare (v.9). Against the calm and stately dignity of the voice of God saying "Let there be..." and it was so in Genesis 1, here the voice of the God thunders over mighty waters and shakes the wilderness in a wild outburst of raw power.

There is little about this psalm that is domestic. There is nothing here about a good harvest; nothing about God providing food for the animals; nothing about the death of your enemies. The (earthly) geographical settings are all wild: mighty seas and floods (vv.3, 10), forests (vv.5, 9) and the desert (v.8). The land of Israel is not mentioned but it is included in the sweep of the storm from Lebanon in the north (vv.5,6) to the desert of Kadesh in the south (v.8). Human existence and human flourishing, carved out of the wild earth, is always precarious. We make ourselves feel secure. We are protected by money, technology, weapons. We put God in a house and visit for an hour on Sundays (well, some Sundays) and sing mushy religious songs before going home to eat too much. We are as safe as houses.

As I write this (June 2020), flooding in north-eastern India has displaced around 29,000 people from their homes. The past winter saw terrible flooding in the UK, devastating wildfires in Australia, and an earthquake in Turkey that killed 41

people. Houses are not safe. Our existence is always precarious. To whom should we go for security? To whom should we go for the words of eternal life? The God portrayed in Psalm 29 is a wild God. You wouldn't read this psalm and then pray for a parking space, or for sunshine for your picnic or for your loved one not to die. This is not a God who is going to mould the world around your plans. What then?

For billions of people in the world, not to mention animals and plants, the world does not fit around their plans or their dreams. The world is shaped in precisely the opposite direction. They are not stupid and they work hard, often harder and longer than rich people work, but they remain poor and their lives are hard and short. The world is against them. So what does that say about God? A domesticated God who gives me a parking space when I am late for church but does nothing to improve the life of my sister in a refugee camp is not the God who made and cares for the universe. I suspect that only a wild God can bring new life to a world where the greatest evil is done by men (and a few women) in suits in boardrooms and around committee tables: evil proposed, seconded and minuted¹. Only a wild God can disrupt the power of safe, secure dullness and do something new and unexpected. A wild God could depose the powerful as easily as ripping up a mighty cedar tree, and could raise up the humble poor (see 1 Samuel 2.1-10 and Luke 1.46-55). In a world that needs shaking into a new order, only the wild God who is enthroned over the flood can bring the chaos that leads to new life.

In the story of Jesus as told by Matthew, when Jesus, who had said and done so much to disrupt, challenge, and subvert a social order that privileged a few to the cost of many, was executed and hung on a cross, there was darkness over the land between noon and three o'clock. As Jesus died, there was an earthquake and rocks were split. In Gerd Theissen's telling of the story in 'The Shadow of the Galilean', a sympathetic onlooker says, "If the sky could see and feel as we do, it would go dark for grief; if the earth could feel, it would quake with anger"² – the thunder and the passion of a wild God saving the world. Three days later,

¹ C.S. Lewis, The Screwtape Letters (1942, HarperCollins): "I live in the Managerial Age, in a world of 'Admin.' The greatest evil is not now done in those sordid 'dens of crime' that Dickens loved to paint. It is not done even in concentration camps and labour camps. In those we see its final result. But it is conceived and ordered (moved, seconded, carried, and minuted) in clean, carpeted, warmed and well-lighted offices, by quiet men with white collars and cut fingernails and smooth-shaven cheeks who do not need to raise their voices." (From the Preface)

² Gerd Theissen, The Shadow of the Galilean (1987, SCM Press), p.161

Matthew says, there was another earthquake and Jesus was raised to life. How could the earth not shake when a new creation is born of God? Then at the end of Matthew's gospel, Jesus tells his disciples to go into all the world, spreading his message and making more disciples. Within a few years, people were complaining that these Christians had turned the world upside-down (Acts 17.6).

An upside-down world is the only hope we have, because while the world is still this way up, ordered by the laws of money and landed security, far too many people, animals and plants are suffering and their lives are being cut short, while others of us lead privileged lives of plenty. Psalm 29 ends with a request to God for strength and peace (v.11). The language echoes that of vv.1-2: "Grant to the LORD glory and strength; grant to the LORD the glory of his name," and v.11: "May the LORD grant strength ..." It may well be that the peace longed for in v.11b and in the hearts of all who suffer can only come when people like me are willing to follow Jesus into chaos and darkness, at the very real risk of losing everything, and trust themselves to the wild and powerful God rather than to money, privilege and conventional good order. That will be giving God the glory of God's name, reflecting God's nature of justice, peace and life for all. For that I need the strength of God and it can only be granted and received as grace.

Psalm 29 provides a much-needed counter to the calmer expressions of creation faith found in some other biblical passages. If it is indeed old, it may reflect a rural setting where life really was precarious (rather than the safer mercantile urban culture in which most of the bible was written) and when the temptation to turn to useful, domestic gods would have been very real and sometimes very urgent. Safer options were available, so the psalm's portrayal of God as wild and chaotic is therefore full of courage. The psalm voices a choice for God against evidence and against common sense – a voice of faith that is worth listening to because, like the voice of God in the psalm, the voice of wild, raw, unrestrained faith, flying in the face of evidence to the contrary, tears the world we know apart. Only then can this holy, glorious and powerful God create the new world that all creation needs.

Safer options are available to us too. I come from a tradition of Reformed Christianity that values ordered worship and systematic theology, but it's miles away from standing on a mountain top in a howling gale and howling along. A safe, coin-operated God just doesn't begin to compare in my mind with a wild, passionate God who is more alive than I can imagine, who re-defines what alive really means – a vital, visceral God who, out of sheer passion for the poor and broken would very likely take on flesh and blood and roam the earth on human

feet and get those feet and hands nailed to a cross by one of the most well-ordered administrations the world has seen.

This living God is what we need ... and what we get in the real world. The other, the domesticated, pay-per-view God is just a puppet, an advert, a political trick, an idol to take us away from getting our hands dirty, and climbing trees, and getting wet, and rescuing animals, and protecting countryside against the frackers, and feeding the hungry, and shouting at the tops of our voices as we march through the streets that the world is all wrong but the kingdom of God is coming.

Worshipping on the wild side is partly about freeing our minds and our hearts and our strength to see God as big, colourful, vivid, swirling, holy, splendid and alive and dangerous – not a tame God in any way. Then the other side of worshipping on the wild side is trusting in that vital passionate love of God and, as Jesus did, getting down and dirty and experiencing the wild side of life on earth. It means feeling what it's like to be at the raw end of injustice and poverty. It means feeling what it's like to have your beautiful ancestral woodland home bulldozed and all who live there driven out or killed just to make way for a new road. It means standing on the shore while the waves come higher and the flood drowns the crops that were your livelihood and your means of survival. It means learning how to sing the LORD's song from the wild underbelly of the world, because that's the only place where worship makes any sense and the only place where hope that is real hope can be found.

Ideas For Praying With Psalm 29

Outdoors

This is a great outdoor psalm!

Find some wildness. If you can get to the woods, find a blown-down tree, or a branch that's fallen off. If you're very sharp-eyed, you might see a kill site – look for feathers scattered around a tree stump for a hawk kill, or on the ground for a fox kill. If you're near the coast, find some evidence of a cliff-fall or other sea damage, or just sit near (but not too near) the sea when the waves are high. Or just find a wild patch of weeds in your garden or local park.

Spend some time with the wildness, reach out to it with your spirit, as if you're extending your awareness into the wild place and any wild thing that has happened there.

Pay attention to your feelings and, when you feel brave enough, welcome God into your feelings.

Ask God to speak to you. God is present in the wildness. Ask God what s/he wants to say to you about any sense of vulnerability or fear that you feel; or any sense of exhilaration.

Indoors

Get two sheets of paper.

Write 'Order' on one and 'Wildness' on the other.

Pay attention to your feelings: do you feel more drawn towards Order or Wildness?

Jot down any thoughts you may have about each.

Think of bible stories or verses that speak to Order, and some that speak to Wildness.

From each sheet, see if one of those bible passages calls to you most, and spend some time reading it slowly (use a concordance to find the passage in the bible, e.g. www.biblegateway.com).

Ask God to speak to you about your responses to Order and Wildness.

Ask God to lead you on your journey of becoming more fully the person God is calling you to be.

How would you picture God according to this psalm?

Maybe you could use a crayon or some paint and respond in art to how the psalm portrays God, or if you prefer, use movement or dance, or do some drumming or singing. Let your body express your response to God as shown in the psalm.

With this psalm and your response in mind, what do you want to say to God?

Prayer of Intercession

God, your voice is powerful,
your voice is full of majesty.

Speak, Lord,
your servants are listening.

God, your voice is over the waters.
We hear the cries
of those whose homes and fields are flooded,
of those in drought, longing for rain,
of those without clean water or sanitation.
God, your voice is over the waters
and we pray for new life.

Speak, Lord,
your servants are listening.

God, your voice breaks the cedars.
We hear the cries
of de-forested, homeless creatures,
of those forced from their ancestral lands,
of those just trying to scratch a living.
God, your voice breaks the cedars
and we pray for new life.

Speak, Lord,
your servants are listening.

God, your voice flashes forth flames of fire.
We hear the cries
of the de-spoiled, plundered earth,
of poisoned rivers and choking air,
of those whose labour is exploited for the profit of others.
God, your voice flashes forth flames of fire
and we pray for new life.

Speak, Lord,
your servants are listening.

God, your voice shakes the earth.
We hear the cries
of those who have suffered earthquakes,
of those displaced by tsunami or rising seas,
of those who need the cruel world shaken.
God, your voice shakes the earth
and we pray for new life.

Speak, Lord,
your servants are listening.

God, you hear the cries of the poor and afflicted
and we hear your voice when they cry.
Shake the systems of human power that oppress and steal.
Blaze and thunder at our complicity with injustice.
Flood us with compassion and fire us to action with the storm-wind of your Spirit,
until the whole earth is filled with your glory
and blessed with your peace.
Amen.

Collect

God, beyond all borders,
whose voice is thunder
and whose breath is the storm-wind:
shake us out of complacency and quietness,
to be disrupters of injustice and breakers of bonds;
in the name of Jesus,
temple-turner, tomb-buster, life-giver.
Amen.