

Sermon by Lex Breckinridge – 11-17-2019

Pentecost 23

Luke 21:5-19

Psalm 88

Isaiah 65:17-25

Who's in charge here? Do you ever find yourself asking that question? It's pretty confusing and even a little chaotic out there. So confusing that it's hard to figure out if there's any purpose or reason behind the events that take up so much space in our minds and hearts. I saw a poll the other day that found that 47% of those polled say they struggle to determine whether the information they're receiving is true. And 60% say they receive conflicting reports about the same set of facts from different sources. No wonder we're confused. No wonder we don't know who or what, if anyone or anything is in charge.

Of course this isn't the first time in history where chaos and confusion seemed to reign. In the year 586 BC, our ancestors in the faith, citizens of Jerusalem, were conquered by the Babylonian Empire and many in Jerusalem were carried off into exile. There they mourned their fate, they grieved over the chaos and confusion of life in Exile, and they asked themselves where God was, in the midst of all of this. They asked, who's in charge of this? Sound familiar?

Finally, in 536, the Persian Emperor, Cyrus conquered the Babylonians and allowed the exiled Jews to return home to Jerusalem. Joy abounded. A new Heaven and a new Earth seemed to have opened before them. The response of the People of Israel was praise. And their praise was more than thanks. It was almost beyond gratitude. Their praise made one simple, straight forward and crystal clear declaration.

God Reigns! God is in charge. And it is God's will, it is God's policy, that God's justice and righteousness will stand against anything that's in opposition to it. The good news that Psalm 98 and the psalms surrounding it, psalms that were written around the time of their return from exile, the good news these psalms shout out is that God rules the Universe with justice and faithfulness and Mercy. The God of Love, the God of Creativity, the God of beauty, the God of all the Heavens and the Earth, that's who is in charge. And the earliest Christians picked up on this. Jews came to proclaim the Reign of God and they saw in Jesus, in his teaching, his healing, his forgiving and reconciling love, in his sacrificial death and in his

amazing resurrection, in all of this they experienced Jesus as a King and a Messiah, a Savior, who lovingly and faithfully lived out justice and righteousness and mercy for all people. And they sang Psalm 98 as a song about Jesus.

Today, we always say Psalm 98 on Christmas Day. We celebrate the birth of Jesus as one of God's mighty Acts in history. Now, you might not immediately recognize it in this way, but Psalm 98 is the basis for the Christmas hymn "Joy to the World", written by Isaac Watts in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century.

There's another hymn, maybe not as familiar as "Joy to the World", but wonderful in its own way, that tracks Psalm 98. "Earth and all Stars" was written by a Lutheran pastor named Herb Brokering to celebrate the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of St. Olaf's College in Minnesota. When I was in school ministry, our students loved to sing this hymn. It celebrates schools and classrooms and labs and loud boiling test tubes and knowledge and truth and loud sounding wisdom. One reason they liked it because it celebrates being loud. And what high school student could resist that? Herb Brokering said this about what inspired him to write this hymn: "I tried to gather into a hymn of praise the many facets of life which emerge in the life of a community. So there are references to buildings, nature, learning, family, festivity, Seasons, emotions, death and resurrection, bread, wine, water, wind, sun, spirit, all have made great impressions on my imagination."

Our psalm and this hymn remind us that making a joyful noise of praise is a really important way we can know God. Israel praised in the midst of the most difficult times. Times of crisis and conflict. Yes Israel lamented. But Israel also praised. Praise is our amazement at the beauty of Creation. Praise celebrates God's love. Praise basks in God's love.

Of all the marvelous things that God has done, the most marvelous has to be that God shows up in our midst. God in Jesus shows up in the here and now. Teaching, healing, reconciling, suffering, rising. Pretty marvelous, wouldn't you say?

So maybe you've already begun to suspect that this sermon is really an excuse to talk about one of my favorite hymns and then to sing it. Well, you would be correct.

I do love this hymn of praise. (Hymn 412) I do love this very loud hymn. So enough of me talking. Let's let Lacey and Catherine and Jim sing the first 3 verses and then we'll all join in the last three.