

“The Fire, Lightning, and Mountains”

Westminster Presbyterian (Greenwood)

06.02.19

Acts 16: 25-34 (CEB)

25 Around midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. **26** All at once there was such a violent earthquake that it shook the prison’s foundations. The doors flew open and everyone’s chains came loose. **27** When the jailer awoke and saw the open doors of the prison, he thought the prisoners had escaped, so he drew his sword and was about to kill himself. **28** But Paul shouted loudly, “Don’t harm yourself! We’re all here!” **29** The jailer called for some lights, rushed in, and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. **30** He led them outside and asked, “Honorable masters, what must I do to be rescued?” **31** They replied, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your entire household.” **32** They spoke the Lord’s word to him and everyone else in his house. **33** Right then, in the middle of the night, the jailer welcomed them and washed their wounds. He and everyone in his household were immediately baptized. **34** He brought them into his home and gave them a meal. He was overjoyed because he and everyone in his household had come to believe in God.

Psalms 97 (CEB)

- 1** The Lord rules! Let the earth rejoice!
Let all the islands celebrate!
- 2** Clouds and thick darkness surround God.
God’s throne is built on righteousness and justice.
- 3** Fire proceeds before God,
burning up God’s enemies on every side.
- 4** God’s lightning lights up the world;
the earth sees it and trembles!

5 The mountains melt like wax before the Lord,
before the Lord of the whole world!

6 Heaven has proclaimed God's righteousness,
and all nations have seen his glory.

7 All those who worship images,
those who are proud of idols,
are put to shame.

All gods bow down to the Lord!

8 Zion has heard and celebrates,
the towns of Judah rejoice,
because of your acts of justice, Lord,

9 because you, Lord, are the Most High
over all the earth,
because you are so superior to all other gods.

10 Those of you who love the Lord, hate evil!
God guards the lives of his faithful ones,
delivering them from the power of the wicked.

11 Light is planted like seed for the righteous person;
joy too for those whose heart is right.

12 Rejoice in the Lord, righteous ones!
Give thanks to God's holy name!

God has created a paradox for us to work through this morning. This Psalm creates a vibrant mental image of God, but that image is twofold and seems to contradict itself. Verse 1, "The Lord rules! Let earth rejoice! Let all the islands celebrate! But verse 3, "Fire proceeds before God, burning up God's enemies on every side." Verse 6, "Heaven has proclaimed God's righteousness, and all nations have seen God's glory." but verse 7, " All those who worship images, those who are proud of idols, are put to

shame. All gods bow down to the Lord!” This paradox exists throughout this passage and quite frankly throughout the Bible.

Maybe you’re hearing the most positive parts of this scripture and you feel uplifted. After all, “The Lord rules, Heaven has proclaimed God’s righteousness and all nations have seen God’s glory. Those of you who love the Lord, hate evil! God guards the lives of his faithful ones, delivering them from the power of the wicked. Light is planted like seed for the righteous person; joy too for those whose heart is right.” Others may be hearing the parts of this message that may not immediately sound positive. It may be confusing, or you don’t quite know how to feel about God as God is presented. The God that is presented in this message is “surrounded by clouds and thick darkness, God burns up enemies on each side, and All those who worship images, those who are proud of idols, are put to shame. All gods bow down to the Lord!” These are also presented as true statements of the Lord. God is presented in this psalm as a being so great that the power, might, and magnitude cannot be contained. Fire proceeds before God, God’s lightning lights up the whole world, mountains melt like wax, and Heaven proclaims God’s righteousness. These are some powerful moves that God is showing off. So how do we, in our current context begin to understand this paradox of a God who is preceded by fire, a God who’s lightning lights up the whole world, a God who causes mountains to melt like wax, finally, a God who is rejoiced as Most High over all the earth?

I don’t know if y’all have ever experienced these phenomena, but we don’t have to look far to be able to empathize with a fire that burns everything in its path. We hear of far too many fires that happen on the west coast. For instance, in the fire last November, 153,336 acres were destroyed, 18,804 structures turned into matchsticks, 5,596 firefighters fighting to control them. The storms can be truly devastating. We hear about these firestorms all the time, but we may not have experienced them ourselves.

What about lightning? Have you ever been close to a tree or field when lightning decides to strike? I remember a very specific time this happened. One summer when I was a camper at another camp, we were playing games in the picnic shelter at the front field. This field is surrounded by a forest, and suddenly one of those evening

thunderstorms hit with no warning whatsoever. It rained hard for a while, and suddenly the loudest noise I have ever heard shattered the air around us. The counselors jumped up, they made us get under the picnic tables, convinced the entire building would fall. We didn't realize what had happened, and it was terrifying. However, we looked into the woods- where a tree had been absolutely demolished by the bolt of lightning. I will never forget that sound.

While most of us have experienced fires, big or small, and lightning storms, I assume this imagery of the mountains is new. I am fairly doubtful that any of us present have seen mountains melt like wax. But we have seen wax melt. Soft enough to mold and squish in our hands, warm enough to drip onto our fingers when they are cold during a Christmas Eve service. But in this case, we are talking about the literal mountains. And God causes them to turn to wax. We can never comprehend the power that takes. I imagine in this verse, God is reminding us that God gave us the mountains, and can turn them to wax in a moment. God's power doesn't depend on a human understanding of science, or a human understanding of how the world works. God's power doesn't depend on human bounds at all.

God has so much power, and might, that even the heavenly realm itself proclaims glory and honor to God. The entire earth rejoices at the name of the Lord. God has so much power that God is able to literally plant light and joy in our lives and in our hearts. This joy and this light are special today because this week, in the liturgical calendar, we are waiting, patiently or otherwise, for the Holy Spirit to descend to the people of Pentecost next week, but we sit waiting after Jesus has ascended from our world to the next. In our liturgical calendar, Jesus ascended to heaven on Thursday, and next Sunday, we will celebrate Pentecost as the Spirit descends on the disciples that are sitting in an upper room, scared to preach.

This may be an awkward time for some, we may not feel like we truly know what to do while we are waiting for the Spirit to descend, and truly, I imagine that the disciples felt this way as well. They didn't know what would happen. They didn't know if they would be left without guidance. But the triune God is able to transform lives

instantly, God already knew that the Spirit was on its way down. We don't have to worry about God showing up or not, because God has already transformed people. For instance, imagine the guard of Paul and Silas' prison cells, really picture him in your mind. He wakes up and sees that the doors are open, he didn't even look before assuming that the prisoners had left. He had resigned himself to the idea that death by suicide was the best option.

Paul and Silas already knew God the Most High was present with them, completely present in the prison cells that were binding them. They shouted to the guard in verses 28-30 "... 'Don't harm yourself! We're all here!' The jailer called for some lights, rushed in, and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. He led them outside and asked, 'Honorable masters, what must I do to be rescued?'" God transforms his life through Paul and Silas speaking to him. His whole household is transformed and chooses to follow God Most High.

This sounds so simple, right? We just *hear* about the God who melts mountains, the God who's lightning lights up the world, the God who is preceded by fire and our lives are transformed. While it sounds simple, we still feel anxious that maybe this Pentecost, the Spirit won't descend like it always has. What if we are in a tougher time than we were before and suddenly it doesn't feel like God can get us through this one? How do we know that God will transform us just like God transforms the mountains into wax and the guard that slept outside of the prison of Paul and Silas?

That's when trust and faith come in. And it can definitely be difficult, so when we find that particular trust difficult, there is God's grace ready and waiting for us. Many of us have been hearing about the God who can melt mountains since we were children. We know the stories, we've heard the Sunday School songs, we watched VeggieTales to understand the stories. But sometimes those don't feel like enough and we must lean into the trust and faith that God will be present time and time again. In fact, as long as this trust and faith in God are present, we are invited to take the waters of life. It is expressly stated in one of the lectionary verses today: Revelation 22: 17, "The Spirit and the bride say, "Come."

And let everyone who hears say, “Come.”

And let everyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift...”

God is asking us to come to the water of life, asking us to trust in God, and asking us to have faith in the God that is preceded by fire, who’s lightning is seen by the whole world, and who makes the mountains melt like wax.

Please pray with me,

Most High and awesome God,

We come to you in a time of waiting. We ask for your grace and your love as we wait and as we may doubt the way forward. We hear your Words to us today that we must find you in our day to day lives as we know you are present. We ask for you to remind us of your awesome power, your graceful love, and your ever-present Spirit.

Amen