

Preaching the Psalms

Psalm 68:1-10, 32-35, (Ascension Sunday)

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At first sight, Psalm 68 does not seem like a prime candidate for proclamation. Even if a preacher were inclined to preach on Psalm 68, he or she might well be discouraged by the commentators, who regularly point out that Psalm 68 is among the more difficult psalms to interpret.¹ James Limburg mentions a German commentator who catalogued “some four hundred differing interpretations of the psalm!”² There is some justification for concluding that Psalm 68 is difficult. It includes unusual words; its syntax is not clear; it has no regular poetic structure; it contains a number of enigmatic images and allusions. Even so, as Gerald Wilson points out, the essential message of Psalm 68 is clear: “Clear within this otherwise difficult poem are Yahweh’s demonstration of his universal power and authority, the acknowledgment of that authority by the nations and their submission to it, and joyful praise for Yahweh’s righteous kingship by the whole earth. As a unified composition, then, Psalm 68 is a praise hymn celebrating the power of Yahweh to save.”³

Psalm 68 is about something which is as contemporary as this morning’s newspaper – *power* (see “power” three times in vv. 34-35). Psalm 68 is about God’s *sovereignty* (note that God is addressed as “my King” in v. 24), a word and a concept which lie at the heart of Jesus’ preaching (see Mark 1:14-15, noting Jesus’ proclamation of “the kingdom of God”) and at the core of Reformed theology.

But the manner in which Psalm 68 makes the case for God’s sovereignty or power is also difficult – not difficult to understand, but rather difficult to accept. From the very beginning of the psalm, the case for God’s power is made by portraying God as the divine warrior, who routs God’s “enemies” (v. 1) and wipes out “the wicked” (v. 2). As it turns out this portrayal is relatively mild compared to the subsequent presentation of God as a sort of male, macho, military commander who leads out the troops (vv. 11-14), subjugates and humiliates the “captives” which he takes (vv. 17-18), and apparently, disposes barbarically of those captives who refuse to cooperate (vv. 21-23). The bloody scene in v. 23 leads immediately into a festive celebration of God’s victory – Psalm 68 is sometimes categorized as a “victory hymn” – in the temple, it seems (vv. 24-27). The entire sequence is shockingly violent; and we are rightly bothered, even offended and repulsed. Of course, what we are apt to forget is that Psalm 68 is no more violent than what we daily take for granted in our contemporary world. A recent article in *Time* reminds us of the horribly violent realities of just the past fifteen years of human history: “We’ve visited untold horrors on ourselves – in Mogadishu, Rwanda, Chechnya, Darfur, Beslan, Baghdad, Pakistan, London, Madrid, Lebanon, Israel, New York City, Abu Ghraib, Oklahoma City, an Amish schoolhouse in Pennsylvania – all of the crimes committed by the highest, wisest, most principled species the planet has produced.”⁴ But, the objection may be, these are human-orchestrated atrocities, many of which we label as terrorism. We expect better from the Bible and its portrayal of God.

Yes, but what this objection misses is that Scripture is unremittingly incarnational

—that is, it uses human language and cultural symbols and systems to speak about God. What is at issue in Psalm 68, according to James L. Mays, is “the coming of the reign of God in space and time.”⁵ But how does one speak of the holy, transcendent God entering our world of “space and time”? By necessity, according to Gerald Wilson, one must speak in hyperbole and metaphor.⁶

In the case of Psalm 68, the Israelite poets have employed the mythopoeic, metaphorical stock of their Canaanite environment. In the Canaanite view, Baal was the one “who rides upon the clouds” (Ps 68:4; see v. 33), the one responsible for the rain which made the crops grow. This designation now is claimed for the God of Israel; and vv. 7-10 accordingly present God’s production of rain. This aspect of the poem does not bother us, but there are further dimensions of the Baal material upon which the Israelite poets drew. Baal is involved in a struggle with the god Mot (Death) and his chaotic forces, including Nahar (River) whom Baal defeats by crushing his head, an action similar to that of Ps 68:21, which introduces the most violent section of the psalm. As Wilson concludes concerning the effect of Israel’s borrowing from its Canaanite cultural environment, “The violence has become a metaphor for the completeness of God’s power and the certainty of the defeat of his cosmic foes.”⁷

But beyond a consideration of the cultural background which seems to have informed Psalm 68, there are aspects of the psalm itself that put its violence in a particular perspective. For instance, even though the “violence has become a metaphor for the completeness of God’s power,” it is evident that God exercises divine sovereignty as something other than the Rambo-like terminator which the psalm seems on the surface to suggest. In this regard, it is telling that the psalm begins with petition in vv. 1-3 and returns to petition in vv. 28-31—in short, there are still “enemies” (v. 1; see v. 21), those “who lust after tribute” and “delight in war” (v. 30). If God were simply an enforcer, there should be no enemies, at least not for long. But in the Psalms (see Psalm 2 and virtually all of the prayers for help), and in the life of Jesus, and in our own real-life situations, there are always those who oppose God and God’s purposes for the world (and sometimes it is we ourselves!). Given this reality, the logical conclusion is that God exercises sovereignty differently than the world generally expects power to be wielded. Ordinarily in the so-called “real world,” we are told, “might makes right.” But not for God! Rather, in the world of God’s reign, which the Bible consistently portrays as the *real* “real world,” it is just the opposite—right makes might. Or, in other words, God exercises power as love rather than unilateral force, as compassion rather than prohibitive constraint. While it may not appear to be the case at first sight, Psalm 68 itself reinforces this direction and conclusion, as Mays recognizes and articulates:

In spite of its militant character and victorious confidence, such is not its spirit. There is a self-understanding and self-description in the psalm’s measures that belies such a reading. The uses assigned to the power of the LORD as divine warrior are crucial. The God who dwells in his holy habitation [see vv. 5, 24-27] as victor is father of orphans and protector of widows, who gives the desolate a home and liberates prisoners [vv. 5-6] The song belongs to the lowly, who in the midst of the powers of this world remember and hope for the victory of God.⁸

Note well, as Mays emphasizes, that the uses of God's power are crucial; and the psalm itself affirms that God, the divine warrior, "fights" for the vulnerable and the dispossessed. And note well too, in Mays's words, that Psalm 68 "belongs to the lowly"! This is precisely why it is important not to excise vv. 11-31 from the psalm, as the lectionary does. Rather, we need to hear the whole psalm, as Gary Charles also insists in his sermon, "Rider of the Clouds." To be sure, these violent verses may upset and unsettle us, maybe even embarrass us, as Gary suggests. And to be sure, I am familiar with the argument that violence in the Bible simply serves to reinforce the violent propensities of the powerful and ruthless, so that Scripture at these points is best ignored. While I have no doubt that this argument is well-intentioned, and while I certainly do not want to do anything to reinforce violent inclinations, I also take very seriously that Psalm 68 belongs to the lowly. It is precisely the lowly – the vulnerable and the dispossessed – who want and who need and who rightly claim the biblical view of a God who *fights* for them against the powerful forces of evil, injustice, and oppression. To read and heed the whole of Psalm 68 is, in essence, to stand in solidarity with the lowly, protesting the evil of those who oppose God, and professing the trust that it is indeed God "who daily bears us up" (v. 19). To read and heed Psalm 68 in its entirety is, in Gary's words, to "let out a scream that will pierce the ears of evil."

Mindful of the danger that Psalm 68 might be appropriated triumphalistically by the ruthless and powerful to justify their violence by claiming that "God is on our side," we should clearly emphasize in interpreting and proclaiming Psalm 68 that our God fights non-violently. The psalm itself points in this direction by portraying God's power ultimately as love and compassion rather than as enforcement and constraint. Interpreting Psalm 68 as Christians on Ascension Sunday at the culmination of the Easter season reinforces this direction. Jesus, the resurrected and ascended one, is still the crucified one. The resurrection/ascension (and the earliest church probably viewed these as simultaneous rather than sequential) does not cancel or negate Jesus' suffering, but rather the resurrection/ascension validates Jesus' life and ministry. In the first century, the scandal of Jesus' resurrection would not have centered on historicity, as it does in our contemporary context. In other words, the scandal would not have been that Jesus *arose*, but rather that *Jesus* arose – that is, the resurrection affirms that Jesus truly proclaimed and fully embodied the presence of God in our world in his ministry of suffering love.⁹ True power, genuine sovereignty, is the power of serving, suffering love. In his sermon, Gary helpfully articulates this conclusion by juxtaposing the two titles, "Rider of the Clouds" and "Climber of the Cross."

The proclamation of God's power as serving, suffering love puts in perspective the concluding affirmation in v. 35 that God "gives power and strength to his people." The thrice-repeated "power" in vv. 34-35 (see also v. 28, where the same Hebrew root repeated these three times in vv. 34-35 also underlies "might" and "strength," suggesting again that "power" is crucial for the entire psalm) is ascribed to God as something which God shares. As Limburg comments: "This God, however, is not power hungry but gives *power to the people of God* (v. 35). God watches over orphans, protects widows, and is concerned for the homeless and for prisoners (vv. 5-6). Should not God's people use their God-given power to do the same?"¹⁰

In short, the "power and strength" which God gives to God's people are not to be construed triumphalistically as some sort of privilege or reward. Rather, the people of God are empowered to love as God loves and to serve as God serves. More

specifically, the people of God are empowered to confront and endure the same kind of opposition which God must confront from God's "enemies" in Psalm 68. We Christians may properly understand such strength to be the power of the resurrection, which enables us to do what Jesus invited and invites his followers to do – take up their crosses and follow him (see Mark 8:34).

To follow the God who is the "Father of orphans and protector of widows" (v. 5), to follow the risen and ascended Jesus who we Christians profess, fully embodied with the wisdom and power of the God of Israel, is to have a mission. Not coincidentally, the account of the ascension in Acts 1:9 is immediately preceded by the promise to the disciples of "power" (Acts 1:8); and a commission shared with the God revealed in Jesus Christ is at least implied or anticipated: "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." The Acts of the Apostles indicates clearly enough that the power which they received was not an insurance policy against hardship and suffering, but rather the strength to endure faithfully every manner of enmity and opposition, quite literally, for God's sake. Gary's concluding question is really an invitation to mission: "What if Ascension Sunday were our annual bookend to Easter Sunday when with the cadences of Psalm 68 beating throughout the service, we reclaimed the biblical image of God as a street fighter, a non-violent fighter, who will fight to the death rather than remain silent before the evil around us and within us?" Because we share God's power, we also share in God's fight against injustice and oppression.

The "evil around us and within us" means that the faithful will always encounter opposition, as did Jesus and the apostles and prophets and psalmists. So, it is fitting that John Knox chose to conclude the Scots Confession with a prayer, which begins with Ps 68:1 and also reflects the content of vv. 32 and 35: "Arise, O Lord, and let thine enemies be confounded; let them flee from thy presence that hate thy godly name. Give thy servants strength to speak thy word with boldness, and let all nations cleave to the true knowledge of thee. Amen."¹¹ The one who prays thusly will be properly positioned for praise, especially when praise is understood not only as a liturgical act, but also as a way of life in which we courageously conform our wills to the will of God, the "Father of orphans and protector of widows," who "gives the desolate a home to live in" and "leads out the prisoners to prosperity" (vv. 5-6).

Notes

1 John Goldingay, *Psalms, Volume 2: Psalms 42-89* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2007), 311-312.

2 James Limburg, *Psalms* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 225.

3 Gerald H. Wilson, *Psalms Volume 1* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2002), 934-935.

4 Jeffrey Kluger, "Ape with a Conscience: Why Bad Acts Come from Good People," *Time* 170/23 (December 3, 2007): 55.

5 James L. Mays, *Psalms* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1994), 228.

6 Wilson, *Psalms, Volume 1*, 944-946.

7 *Ibid.*, 944.

8 Mays, *Psalms*, 228-229.

9 Stephen J. Patterson, *The God of Jesus: The Historical Jesus and the Search for Meaning* (Harrisburg, Penn.: Trinity Press International, 1998), 211-240.

10 Limburg, *Psalms*, 227.

11 Mays, *Psalms*, 229.