

Sunday, May 21, 2017 – Sixth Sunday of Easter/New Member Sunday
“A God For Us”

Psalm 66

Rev. Derek S. Klemm, Mountain View Lutheran Church, Las Vegas, NV

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen.

The way our psalm starts you might think that the psalmist never had a bad day in His life. It is remarkably upbeat, isn't it? Confident? Even boasting, about God's great might, His power? This isn't just saying that God is good. The entire CREATION cannot help but sing glory to God's name and sing His praise, nor the whole earth help but bow down before Him!

This guy wasn't talking to the same people I talk to, I know that. I mean c'mon, lots of people believe in no god at all. Plenty worship a whole assortment of other gods. Meanwhile the creation meant to sing God's glory... I see a lot of corruption. It infests government, businesses, even families and churches. Maybe God is *due* all praise and glory, but that's different than saying He gets the praise He deserves!

Or, maybe that's not what the psalmist is getting at here – even if the glory isn't going to God, it's going somewhere, a “Yay science!” from Bill Nye or a prayer to another deity. This world is incredible. There's simply too much to be amazed at, to wonder about, to see and to know. I wish I knew more, and had time to learn more – science, history, mathematics, human social interactions and of course, watching more baseball – and there are people who make their living off of specializing on one tiny corner of God's creation, something that causes them to marvel. We don't just want to know, we **need** to know more. We're curious creatures and I'd argue that curiosity is in itself a form of thanks and praise. One thing is undeniable, to we who believe in Jesus – that on the Last Day, every knee will bow and every tongue confess – grudgingly or not, that Jesus Christ is Lord. Whether knowingly or not, just by showing the smallest bit of wonder, all creation is joining in God's praise.

Pause. Take a moment to consider what God has done, from the massiveness of the universe to the detailed design of our bodies to the minuteness and complexity of the world at the atomic level, and on top of that – His continued care for it all – to say the least God sounds like a pretty important and busy guy. So much so, that some folks, while confessing to believe in some kind of God, also assume that with all that big important stuff to take care of, tiny human creatures on a little planet circling an average star in a far-flung arm of an average galaxy containing billions of stars, which is just one of billions of galaxies – God's there, and that's great, but isn't really relevant for our lives.

That's not what the psalmist says. That very same God of all creation, glorious, exalted, worthy of praise also cares for us. After all, does it make any sense to say that God can do everything I've just mentioned and yet to say that limits Him from having the capacity to be intimately involved with the details? Indeed, all the more reason to sing praises to His name. His hand comes into our history, as the psalmist mentions, intervening to save a group of people being chased by their former slavemasters. He's a God who cares about justice, and who keeps promises, a God who cares, who loves. He's a God so far above and beyond us that He's incomprehensible, and yet at the same time deigns to tell us about Himself, to the limited degree that we can possibly understand. Suddenly, the psalmist's praises don't look so untrue to experience.

But there's more. You may remember that I started this sermon by saying, "The way our psalm starts, you may think that the psalmist never had a bad day in his life." We're not completely sure who wrote this or when, but man most scholars guess the author is one of Judah's kings, and that it is written following a huge threat – hence all the talk here about God's great power and defeating His enemies. I'm going to ask you to take a leap with me as we go with an assumption, which is, I think a reasonable one, that this could have been King Hezekiah.

This was a tumultuous reign, to say the least. You can read about this in 2 Kings, starting with chapter 18. Early in Hezekiah's reign, during the 720's BC, the powerful nation of Assyria and its' capital, Nineveh – the same country the prophet Jonah had preached to about a lifetime earlier – had gone back to their old ways and were doing some pretty evil things. Assyria was known for pillaging and destruction, murder and unspeakable acts of cruelty and torture as it conquered foreign countries. A few years into Hezekiah's reign, in 722, this fate met Israel, Judah's neighbor to the north. Judah, and its capital Jerusalem, were next in the crosshairs – and Assyria threatened that if Judah didn't empty its treasury and submit to a shakedown to Assyria, they'd be destroyed as well. Hezekiah rightly told Assyria to take a hike – after all, if he remained faithful to Yahweh, he had nothing to worry about – but then violated God's plan to only trust in Him and buddied up to Egypt for help. Assyria's king, Sennacherib, attacked and left Hezekiah holding onto only Jerusalem and its suburbs. Now shaken, Hezekiah disobeyed God again and paid off Assyria by emptying the national treasury of over 10 tons of silver and 1 ton of gold – even stripping gold plating off the doorposts to God's temple. Not good enough... Assyria sent a massive force of nearly 200,000 soldiers to lay siege and take the rest.

Sometimes, it takes having our backs against the wall, and realizing that we're completely hopeless in our own power or strength, to be shaken, woken up and realize that we can do nothing on our own.

Hezekiah stops trying to fix the situation by throwing money at it or asking other nations for help. He seeks Godly counsel from the prophet Isaiah. He prays to the only one with the power to help him out of his mess and God does deliver – striking the entire Assyrian army dead and saving Judah from certain destruction, as only an all-powerful God who also cares about His people can do. And then, we think, he writes this psalm.

That's not the first time God provided miraculous salvation – we heard the psalmist compare God's deliverance to rescuing the Israelites by parting the Red Sea. Nor is it the last time such a turn would take place – as Jesus' own blood would be made payment for our sin,

rescuing us from the certainty of eternal death. Time and again, God's people find themselves in a hopeless situation for which they cannot help themselves and He delivers them from certain destruction.

Yes, this lofty praise, this psalm of such joy and hope, is a psalm that not only follows a very dark hour, where it seemed like all was lost, but comes during a time where challenges continued to confront God's people. Hezekiah, or whoever wrote this psalm, needed God's help. He didn't have everything in life figured out – the Assyrians still had whittled down much of his country, killed his people, had ripped off the treasury, leaving the nation of Judah weak and vulnerable – and those problems are still there while this psalm is being written. And when you leave here this morning, filled with God's gifts in the Lord's Supper, your problems will still be there, too. Yet there's a joy that soaks in, all the way through us that comes with the certainty that this almighty God, powerful beyond all comprehension, is also a God who is for us.

And you and I, bought with Jesus' blood, our sins nailed up with Him on the cross, are in a similar place. Certainly, the effects of sin still haunt our lives, whether we struggle living as the new creation God has made us to be or whether we suffer because we live in a fallen world. In times that are tough, God's help flows for in all circumstances. The same deliverance God is praised for in this psalm is made by God for you and me – through the forgiveness of our sin, through deliverance from eternal death and with the promise that one day, even our physical bodies will be raised to a new and flawless existence. In the bright light of what God has done for us, joy shines in the darkness and God's promises of what is yet to come give hope going forward. In Jesus' name, Amen.