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Psalm 99

When Holy God becomes unholy

The LORD reigns, let the nations tremble; he sits enthroned between the cherubim, let the earth shake. **2** Great is the LORD in Zion; he is exalted over all the nations. **3** Let them praise your great and awesome name— **he is holy.** **4** The King is mighty, he loves justice— you have established equity; in Jacob you have done what is just and right. **5** Exalt the LORD our God and worship at his footstool; **he is holy.** **6** Moses and Aaron were among his priests, Samuel was among those who called on his name; they called on the LORD and he answered them. **7** He spoke to them from the pillar of cloud; they kept his statutes and the decrees he gave them. **8** O LORD our God, you answered them; you were to Israel a forgiving God, though you punished their misdeeds. **9** Exalt the LORD our God and worship at his holy mountain, for the LORD our **God is holy.**

Does anyone believe in God anymore? This last week, a US senator from Nebraska had his lawsuit against God thrown out of court because “the Almighty wasn’t properly served, since God’s home address is unlisted.” Apparently, the Senator accused God of “causing fearsome floods, egregious earthquakes, horrendous hurricanes, terrifying tornadoes, pestilential plagues, ferocious famines, devastating droughts, genocidal wars, birth defects and the like.” The suit also says “God has caused calamitous catastrophes resulting in the wide-spread death, destruction and terrorization of millions upon millions of the Earth’s inhabitants including innocent babes, infants, children, the aged and infirm without mercy or distinction” (AP – 10/15/2008). I do not know what is worse, a senator willing to sue God or a people willing to elect him. Does anyone believe in God anymore?

This is far from the thoughts of Psalm 99, which begin with the words, “The Lord reigns, let the nations tremble.” When was the last time the nations trembled before God? When was the last time you trembled before God?

The key to understanding Psalm 99 is the word “holy.” Three times the word is used in reference to God. “Holy is he!” (vv. 3 and 5) and “God is holy” (v. 9). With the triple “holy” one cannot help but think of our opening hymn:

*Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty!
Early in the morning our song shall rise to thee.
Holy, holy, holy, merciful and mighty!
God in three Persons, blessed Trinity!*

The hymn is based on the scene of Revelation 4:8-11, where creatures sing day and night, “Holy, holy, holy, the Lord God the Almighty...” The hymn recalls the vision of the prophet Isaiah, where he saw and heard the heavenly creatures singing, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts” (Isaiah 6:3). Three is a perfect number in the Bible. The Lord’s holiness is perfect. “He is holy. He is holy. God is holy.”

It is with the word “holy” that causes us trouble. The word “holy” means separate or apart. A place is holy because it is set apart as the Lord appears there (ex. Mount Sinai). People called by God become holy messengers. The Sabbath day became holy when God set it apart.

In Psalm 99, God is holy because he is exalted over the nations. God is holy because his judgments, unlike the judgments on earth, are always righteous and just. God is holy because he delivers his people, answers their prayers, forgives their sins, and punishes evildoers. The Lord is holy.

Does anyone believe God is holy? I am afraid that we have mistaken God’s separateness for distance. We do not think God is the holy other. We think God is somewhere far away. Like the senator, we think our problems are the result of God’s distance. The financial problems are the result of God’s failure to bail us out. Wars and natural disasters are the result of God’s unwillingness to lend a gracious hand. We put God on trial for our own crimes. Why not? If God is distant, he will not intervene.

If we are not suing God, we turn God into a kind and cuddly God. We tell ourselves that God is love, love, love! God is safely filed away in the back of the drawer. God hovers in the background beyond our busy lives. Let’s not bother God. He is away on some vacation. Does anyone believe in God anymore?

The people of Israel got into trouble for mistaking God’s separateness for distance. In I Samuel 8, the people ask for a king. Samuel warned them that a king would take many things from them. Samuel explains:

"This is what the king who will reign over you will do: He will take your sons and make them serve with his chariots and horses, and they will run in front of his chariots. **12** Some he will assign to be commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and others to plow his ground and reap his harvest, and still others to make weapons of war and equipment for his chariots. **13** He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. **14** He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive groves and give them to his attendants. **15** He will take a tenth of your grain and of your vintage and give it to his officials and attendants. **16** Your menservants and maidservants and the best of your cattle and donkeys he will take for his own use. **17** He will take a tenth of your flocks, and you yourselves will become his slaves. **18** When that day comes, you will cry out for relief from the king you have chosen, and the LORD will not answer you in that day." **19** But the people refused to listen to Samuel. "No!" they said. "We want a king over us. **20** Then we will be like all the other nations, with a king to lead us and to go out before us and fight our battles (I Samuel 8:11-20)."

A king will take sons, daughters, fields, vineyards, grain, and servants. The people of Israel were warned. However, they would rather have a terrible king than a distant God.

What must God do with a people who mistake his holiness for distance? What is God to do with a people bent on suing him?

God in his holiness could wipe us out. God probably should wipe us out. God could demand that we understand his holiness. That has never worked. So God does the very opposite. Instead of making us understand his holiness, God takes on our un-holiness. Instead of being separate, God attaches himself to us in Christ. As John explains: “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14).

Or as the old Christmas hymn says,

*Christ, by highest heaven adored, Christ, the everlasting Lord,
Late in time behold him come, Offspring of a virgin's womb
Veiled in flesh the Godhead see! Hail incarnate deity!
Pleased as man with us to dwell, Jesus our Emmanuel!
Hark! The herald angels sing, "Glory to the newborn king!"*

Of course, in doing this, Jesus had to come in weakness and not in might. If Jesus came for the Caesar's of this world, Jesus would have been born in a palace. Instead, Jesus came for the lowly of the world. A manger would be his bed. A cross of wood his throne and thorns his crown. Jesus, lays aside all of heaven's holiness becoming a curse, so that we who are under the curse would be made holy.

Jesus goes further. Jesus is willing to attach himself to the sacraments as well. Jesus enters simple water making baptism holy. Jesus enters simple bread and wine making it holy for you and me. God touches a weak and vulnerable crown of his creation and says **"YES!"**

- You are incorporated into Christ and into his body
- You are initiated, adopted into my covenant people
- You are called! Chosen! Saved! Born Again!
- You are forgiven — free to live without excuses
- You are a royal priest, set aside to proclaim
- You are marked with the cross of Christ forever
- You are given the gift of the Holy Spirit
- You are holy

No matter what you have done or left undone. Holy God has touched you. You are wholly his. Now isn't that something to tremble about? And isn't that something to believe in?

**In Jesus Name,
Amen**