FCCOE; 9/23/18; Psalm 2; Rev. T. Ziegenhals

“Praying Our Intimidation”

Introduction: We’re reflecting on the Psalms this fall with an eye toward nurturing our life of prayer. I’ve chosen the Psalms for our focus as they are a collection of prayers that God has given us to be a kind of textbook for our own prayerful meditation. They provide us with an “on-ramp” if you will for both speaking, and listening, to God.

So far, we’ve looked at Psalm 48, one of the songs of Zion, that helps us to contemplate the beauty of God. And we’ve looked Psalm 77, a lament that helps us cry out to God, laying bare the struggles of our soul, and reminding us at the same time to ground our confidence in the present and hope for the future in the past actions of our remarkable God.

This morning we’ll look primarily at Psalm 2 which I had us hear along with Psalm 1 because there are some important links that we’ll notice as we go along. Psalm 2 is what is known as a royal psalm which, along with Psalm 1, serves as a kind of doorway, or introduction, into the entire collection. It’s a psalm which helps us to pray our intimidation, to bring before God those things, especially in the public and political sphere, that cause us to fear. It’s a psalm that helps us to ground our confidence and hope not only in what God has done in the past, but also in what God promises to bring to fulfillment in the future. [Q: What makes you afraid or intimidated as you look out at the world?]

I. Human Pride and Power

A. Psalm 2 begins by observing that the nations and peoples of the earth, led by their kings and leaders, have taken a stand against God and his king, known as his “anointed” (vv. 1-3). “Let us break their chains and throw off their shackles,” the nations cry out, in reference to the rule and authority of the LORD which they, sadly, want no part of. As we ponder this cry, one of the most intriguing words in these opening verses is the word “Why?” It reflects the writer’s amazement at how anyone could ignore and/or resist the rule of the LORD, for he knows that the LORD is not some tyrant who wants to oppress us, but a good and gracious God who wants what is best for his creation.

B. If we look at Psalm 1 and 2 as one, as some think it may have originally been, we see these two ways of living spelled out. On the one hand there is living however we want, walking with the wicked, standing with the sinners, and sitting with the mockers. It’s a position that expands from a personal stance against God and his ways in Psalm 1 to the collective opposition to God by the nations in Psalm 2. This way of opposition will be judged surely and strongly by the LORD. On the other hand, there is delighting in the Word of God and honoring his way, which brings blessing, as the beginning verse and end verse promise in a kind of bookend fashion (1:1; 2:12). Another way to see this is to know that the word for “meditate” (1:2) and “plot” (2:1) translates the same Hebrew word, just in different contexts. Are we reflecting on how to draw closer to God, or how to run further away?

C. As we consider these psalms as an on-ramp to our own praying, we need to make sure that we stop here and don’t just apply the “Why?” of 2:1 to the “awful, ungodly nations out there,” as they exert their pride and power in rebellion against God, but to our own hearts, as Psalm 1 has directed. Because it is the nature of our heart to be inclined to think of the rule and authority of God as some kind of “ball and chain,” believing instead that true happiness will come to us if God would just leave us alone and give us the freedom to do what we want.

Illustration: Boat mooring and necessity for chain and shackles to keep the craft safe and truly free from what could harm it.

“Give me liberty or give me death!” is not just the cry of our current culture; it has been the cry of the rebellious, human heart since the time of Adam and Eve. We’re all inclined to listen to the authority of our sovereign self, and not that of the sovereign God. By way of contrast, the cry of the faithful, transforming heart is this: “God, you know best; let me delight in your word and seek to walk in your way.”

II. God’s Everlasting Throne

A. But to be sure, Psalm 2 does speak out against the nations who oppose God. And in the rest of the psalm, we hear God’s response. It begins, somewhat remarkably, with God’s laughter! It’s laughter because there is no way these puny, earthbound “kings of the earth” can really resist and reject the authority and rule of the creator God who is “enthroned in heaven” above all things. This One sees these human beings, knows their plots, and is unconcerned. He scoffs at them, not because he doesn’t care for them but because he knows their scheming will ultimately come to nothing.

Illustration: Laughing Jesus; cf. Isa. 40:22

B. This laughing God then goes on to declare that his plan for revealing his authority and way on the earth will come through his king, designated as his “anointed.” This term comes from inauguration ceremony of God’s appointed kings who occupied the throne in Jerusalem (“Zion, my holy mountain”). As part of the ceremony, the king was anointed, that is, the priest would pour oil on the king’s head to symbolize the divine authorization and empowerment of his rule. Most likely, as a part of the inauguration, the new king would go on to speak the words in vv. 7-9, naming his role under God as one like a son to a father. The theology for such came out of God’s covenant with David, in which, speaking of the line kings that would come from David, God promised: “I will be his father, and he will be my son. . . Your house and your kingdom will endure forever” (2 Sam. 7:14, 16). The declaration by the king is followed with a promise by God that the great and powerful nations of the world would be no match for the Lord’s king and that if they did not fear the Lord and revere (“kiss”) his son, it would not go well for them. There would be no refuge from him, only in him; his way would be the only way, so wise up!

C. Now, as we think of how this Psalm was prayed throughout the history of Israel, it’s clear from the books of Samuel and Kings that the Lord’s anointed, the various kings who sat on the throne in Jerusalem up until the Exile to Babylon, were not all worthy fellows. Most, in fact, were a failure at following the Lord faithfully and at carrying out their God-given mission to bring his justice and equity to bear in the world in which God had placed them. And, after Israel’s return from the Exile, when it became clear that Israel had regained only a fraction of her former glory, the faithful began to pray this psalm looking toward its fulfillment in the future, coming to believe that there was a deeper meaning to the promise of having a king sit on the throne in Jerusalem. And that deeper meaning rested in the expectation of a Messiah (Hebrew for anointed; Greek was Christ), who would be the means of bringing God’s restoration project about.

D. For this reason, Psalm 2 is found quite often in the NT where it is understood to be fulfilled by Jesus who, at his baptism, the inauguration of his earthly ministry, is identified as God’s son in whom the Father delights (Mk. 1:11; Ps. 2:7), and at his return is identified as the ruler of the kings of the earth, the one who defeats the dragon and rules the nations with an iron scepter (Rev. 1:5; 12:5; Ps. 2:9). Because of this understanding of Jesus as the Christ, the anointed one, who is seated at the right hand of the Father and reigns over all (cf. Eph. 1:15-22), the church in the present time can have great confidence.

To see this, let’s take a brief look at Acts 4:23-31. There, after Peter and John have healed a lame beggar, and declared that the power to do so came from the risen Jesus, they are arrested by the religious authorities, told not to speak any more about this Jesus, and then released. Upon their release they went back to their fellow followers of Jesus and prayed. Their prayer began by invoking God as the creator of all things, and then the one who has revealed himself to the world through his word, and then celebrating the sovereignty of this God and his anointed because all the seemingly disastrous things that took place as Jesus went to the cross under the plotting of the collection of Herod and Pilate and the Gentiles and the Jews were not outside the will of God but took place within his overall purpose. For that reason, the church was able to pray with great confidence, not that the opposition to their message would stop and life would become easy, but that in the midst of the opposition they would be able, empowered by the Holy Spirit, to speak and live out the good news of Jesus with great boldness and that God would continue to do great things among them.

III. Pointers to Prayer

1. Where do I need to hear God’s laughter that all will be well, and that I need not be afraid?

2. Where am I inclined to look at God’s word as a chain and shackle instead of providing me with the freedom to live well?

3. Lord, where do you need to blow away the cobwebs and fill us with your Spirit so that we can proclaim your goodness with great boldness?

4. How does this Psalm change the way I might watch the news and pray for the world?

5. Not: God will see to it that Russia and China will one day be subdued, and America will be great again. But: The gates of hell will not overcome the church, throughout the world, because (as Peter confessed) Jesus is the Christ [the anointed], the Son of the living God (Ma. 16:16-18). So, we can carry out God’s mission in the world with confidence and courage because the church will prevail.