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2-14-1999

Psalm 99

Walter E. Keller

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Psalm 99

(Revised Common Lectionary) (RSV)

This Psalm is one of several whose central theme is the anticipated reign of Yahweh the LORD over all the peoples (verses 1-3). Such a hope is encouraged by the kind of God Yahweh proves himself to be in his dealings with Israel (verses 4-9). One of the striking features of this Psalm is its three-fold ascription of holiness to God (verses 3, 5, and 9). This refrain, which marks the divisions of this Psalm, is progressively lengthened.

Vv. 1-3

**¹ The LORD is king; let the peoples tremble!
He sits enthroned upon the cherubim; let the earth quake!**

These two lines form a perfect parallel. "The LORD is king" is paralleled by "he sits enthroned upon the cherubim." Cherubim were heavenly creatures represented as huge eagle-winged, human-faced bulls or lions (see Ezekiel 10). They decorated the lid of the Ark of the Covenant, which was housed in the Temple in Jerusalem. The Ark was the symbol of the presence of Yahweh among his people and was often regarded as the LORD's throne (see, for example Psalm 80:1). The consequence of Yahweh's majestic kingship is described in another set of parallels: the peoples should tremble and the earth itself should quake.

**² The LORD is great in Zion;
he is exalted over all the peoples.
³ Let them praise your great and awesome name.**

Again, the LORD is great, and acknowledged as great, in Zion, that is, in Jerusalem the capital of God's people. But he is also the ruler, and is to be acknowledged as such, among the peoples of the earth. They too should praise his awe-inspiring name.

Holy is he!

The holiness of God is his transcendence and his otherness. It has been defined as the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, the Mystery which overwhelms yet also fascinates. The holiness of God here is displayed as absolute sovereignty, his divine right to receive the exclusive homage of all the nations.

Vv. 4-5

**⁴ Mighty King, lover of justice,
you have established equity;
you have executed justice
and righteousness in Jacob (Israel).**

The might of this King combines with his love of justice to established fairness and righteousness in Israel. Or it might be more accurate to say that this King has established *the basis* for fairness and righteousness in Israel by giving them his Torah. If we think of

Israel, we shall have to think of Israel at its best, or perhaps of ideal Israel. The real, historical Israel, like every other earthly community, of course, proved to be far removed from that ideal.

**⁵ Extol the LORD our God;
worship at his footstool.**

This call to worship is extended to everyone. It is an invitation to the nations to acknowledge the LORD, our God, as their God also, because he has shown himself to be a God of righteousness and equity. In verse 1 the Ark of the Covenant is pictured as God's throne; here it is portrayed as his footstool, as it is in 1 Chronicles 28:2.

Holy is he!

A second time God receives the acclamation, "Holy!" Here his holiness is displayed in his call for justice and righteousness, fairness and equity.

Vv. 6-9

**⁶ Moses and Aaron were among his priests,
Samuel also was among those who called on his name.**

Like good earthly kings, so God as the King of kings hears when his people call upon him in their need. Moses and Aaron and Samuel are classically the great intercessors on behalf of Israel (see Jeremiah 15:1); and they are here called priests, because it belongs to the priestly office to intercede on behalf of the people. This is the only verse in the Old Testament where Moses is specifically called a priest, though he frequently performed priestly functions. You might care to read Exodus 32:1-14, the story of Moses' intercession; 1 Samuel 7:3-11, the story of Samuel's intercession; and Numbers 16:20-22, the reference to Moses' and Aaron's intercession. When in the New Testament we speak of the priesthood of all believers, we do well to remember that our calling in such a priesthood is to intercede for one another, just as Christ intercedes for us.

**They (these intercessors) cried to the LORD, and he answered them.
⁷ He spoke to them in the pillar of cloud;
they (in turn) kept his decrees,
and the statutes that he gave them.**

The Psalmist here recalls that the LORD in fact heard these intercessors, often in a pillar of cloud (see Exodus 33:9-10; Numbers 12:5; Deuteronomy 31:15). Intercessors not only pray on behalf of the people, but they are also obedient to the word of the LORD that they have then been given.

**⁸ O LORD our God, you answered them;
you were a forgiving God to them,
but an avenger of their wrongdoings.**

The LORD answered “them,” that is, Moses, Aaron, and Samuel and, by extension, the people as a whole on whose behalf they were praying. The LORD’s answer is two-fold. He indeed forgives (literally “bears”!) their sins and punishes their wrong-doing. The Psalm does not make clear whether there are two classes of people, one group of those whom the LORD forgives and another group of those whom he punishes; or whether there is but a single group of people whom God forgives while still punishing them for their wrong-doing.

**⁹ Extol the LORD our God,
and worship at his holy mountain;
for the LORD our God is holy.**

This, the third and final refrain proclaiming the holiness of God, is a call to worship at the holy mountain, namely Mt Zion, the hill on which the Temple had been built. It is *His* holy mountain, it belongs to God. A third time God is acclaimed as holy. His holiness here is displayed both in his willingness to forgive his people and in his punishing work.

Prayer from the LBW to accompany Psalm 99:

Lord our God, King of the universe, you love what is right. Lead us in your righteousness, that we may live to praise you; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

A Further Reflection:

With its three acclamations of God in his holiness, this Psalm brings to mind the inaugural vision of Isaiah in the temple, recorded in Isaiah 6. In verse 6 the angelic seraphim sing, “Holy, Holy, Holy is the LORD of hosts. The whole earth is full of His glory.” This is the text of the *Sanctus* used in the liturgy of the Holy Communion. As in verse 1 of this Psalm, an appearance of God is accompanied by a shaking, only here a shaking of the Temple’s foundations. Isaiah cries out that he has actually seen the King. Such a revelation, however, induced in him the further sense of being a sinner, unable to stand in the presence of the divine holiness. The thrice-holy King then takes away his guilt and forgives him his sin, as in verse 8 of this Psalm. Then Isaiah is sent out as a prophet to God’s people to convince them of their sin, to display God not only as a forgiving God, but also, in the words verse 8 of the Psalm, as an Avenger of their wrongdoings. There is in this chapter little of the Psalm’s expectation that the LORD, the God of Israel, will claim the worship of all the nations. But to give this connection a bit of a stretch – in later chapters of Isaiah we can find such a hope confidently prophesied, as for example in Isaiah 49:6 or perhaps more familiarly in Isaiah 60:1-3.

Prayer of the Day #2 from the LBW for the Transfiguration of Our Lord:

O God, in the transfiguration of your Son you confirmed the mysteries of the faith by the witness of Moses and Elijah, and in the voice from the bright cloud you foreshadowed our adoption as your children. Make us with the king heirs of your glory, and bring us to enjoy its fullness, through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

In the liturgical context of the Transfiguration of Our Lord, the call to worship the holy God directs our gaze to the person of Jesus. The prayer of the day is a good guide into the use of this Psalm in Christian worship. In the Old Testament Israel, the People of God prayed this Psalm; we are the adopted children of God, God's new Israel. Jesus is the King of glory, and our acknowledgement of him as our king is a partial fulfillment of the Psalmist's expectation that all the peoples of the earth should tremble before him. And in Jesus, the crucified Son of God, God is both the God who bears, and thereby forgives us, our sins and who punishes us for our wrongdoing. Punishment does not exclude forgiveness, nor does forgiveness exempt from punishment. But in the forgiveness of the holy God punishment loses its vindictive character and becomes divine tough love.

Walter E. Keller

February 14, 1999 – **Transfiguration Sunday**