

**New St. James Presbyterian Church
Fifth Sunday of Easter
Sunday, May 2, 2021**

**“For Dominion Belongs to the LORD”
Psalm 22:25-31**

The Rev. Dr. David Clark

“For dominion belongs to the LORD,” says the psalmist (v. 28).

A key theme in the Psalms is the announcement that “the LORD reigns.” Some interpreters consider this claim— “The LORD reigns”—nothing less than “the theological center of the Psalter” (Mays), that everything the psalmist says about God is a variation on this central theme (Creach). That’s something you could explore in your own reflections on the Psalms: you could ask yourself, while reading, “How does *this psalm* announce God as reigning and ruling here?”

And we’re going to ask these sorts of question of our Psalm in Unison, Psalm 22:25-31. What does it mean here, in Psalm 22, that God reigns and rules, that “dominion belongs to the LORD”? In saying this, what exactly is the psalmist affirming about God? And how did the psalmist reach this point: what’s the story that led the psalmist here? And why, for the psalmist, is this worth celebrating: why is it worth celebrating that “dominion belongs to the LORD”?

As our Psalm in Unison, we shared in the final seven verses of Psalm 22, appointed by the Lectionary for this Sunday. Yet as we hear the joyful culmination of the psalm, we also need to step back and pay attention to “the hard theological and spiritual struggle” that brought the psalmist to this point (Turner)—because, though this psalm concludes with joy and praise, it begins from a place of devastation and abandonment. You may not realize this, but you almost certainly know the beginning of this psalm: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest” (vv. 1-2). It’s the same psalm that, in the Gospel accounts, we hear Jesus pray from the cross.

The psalm begins, then, in this place of desperation, as a raw “prayer for help” (Mays): “for trouble is near,” the psalmist prays, “and there is no one to help” (v. 11). Then, somehow, the psalmist experiences deliverance, salvation, the rescue of God: “From the horns of the wild oxen you have rescued me” (v. 21), the psalmist prays, suddenly from a place of safety. The psalmist then promises to gather with the faithful and offer grateful praise to God: “I will tell of your name to my brothers and sisters,” the psalmist prays, “in the midst of the congregation I will praise you” (v. 22). Beginning from desolation and desperation, the psalmist prays for God’s rescue; and—after somehow receiving God’s answer, God’s rescue—the psalmist promises to praise God alongside others...

And what praise does the grateful psalmist end up singing? *That’s* what we hear in our Psalm in Unison: the selection we shared this morning, these are the words of praise the psalmist uplifts,

out of gratitude, in the congregation. What we have as our Psalm in Unison is liturgy—the prayers and praises that the psalmist ultimately offers, as promised, in worship. One scholar explains it like this: “The setting [...] is the service of thanksgiving” where “a person whose prayer for deliverance has been answered goes to the sanctuary with those who rejoice at” their rescue “and sings a song of praise and thanksgiving for [their] salvation” (Mays). And in our Psalm in Unison this morning, “we hear [that] song” (Mays), we hear the words and music of thanksgiving and praise. The psalmist suffered through the depths of despair, prayed to God for help, was somehow rescued, and now offers this song of praise to God.

So, let’s listen to that song together: what’s happening in this song of praise that we hear this morning? It begins as an individual song of praise, with the psalmist praising God for this personally experienced rescue—but, quickly, the song of praise opens up broadly as the horizon of praise expands, “widen[ing] the circle of praise, from congregation to humanity itself, [to] all nations [...], and even people yet unborn” (Mays). “From you comes *my praise* in the great congregation” (v. 25), the psalmist begins, then “*All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the LORD; and all the families of the nations shall worship before him*” (v. 27), then “To him, indeed, shall *all who sleep in the earth bow down*” (v. 29), and finally, “*future generations will be told about the Lord, and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn*” (vv. 30-31).

This is remarkable: the psalmist has been rescued by God, but the psalmist’s song expands far beyond praising God for this individual experience—announcing that all humanity in all time will join with the psalmist in praising God. So why does the psalmist believe that this personal experience of rescue merits this universal response of praise? And also, right in the midst of this expanding horizon of praise, the psalmist declares that key affirmation of God’s reign and rule: “For dominion belongs to the LORD” (v. 28). What’s the connection: what does the psalmist’s expanding praise have to do with the rule and reign, the “dominion” of God?

A key detail to notice in this psalm is the psalmist’s self-description as lowly, poor, afflicted. Earlier in the psalm, in awful despair, the psalmist had groaned: “I am a worm, and not human; scorned by others, and despised by the people” (v. 6). The psalmist, as one scholar observes, “is by self-understanding [...] one of the lowly [...]. It is not his affliction that has made him a lowly one; rather,” the scholar adds, “he has undergone his affliction as one of the lowly” (Mays).

And yet, with wonder and joy and relief, the psalmist discovers that lowliness, poverty, wretchedness, none of this—in any way—had diminished God’s loving care and God’s powerful rescue. In the verse just before our Psalm in Unison begins, the psalmist declared: “For [the LORD] did not despise or abhor the affliction of the afflicted [or “the poor,” as the Hebrew can also be translated]; he did not hide his face *from me*, but heard when *I* cried to him” (v. 24). And as the psalmist begins that song of praise, we hear that—because of God’s kindness—the afflicted and the poor can look with hope for the loving care of God: “The poor shall eat and be satisfied” (v. 26), the psalmist declares, with newfound hope and confidence.

This “self-understanding” of the psalmist as “one of the lowly”—this is key to the psalmist’s seemingly sudden turn to this widening joy and praise. The psalmist has experienced life as lowly, scorned, wretched—indeed, more “worm”-like than human (v. 6) ...and yet—and yet!—when the psalmist cried out to God, when this lowly and afflicted one called to God for help and rescue, God did not turn away or hide, but instead answered the psalmist’s prayer with rescue. And this is why, to the psalmist, it’s worth celebrating that “the LORD reigns,” that “dominion belongs to the LORD.” The psalmist has discovered, with joy, that God does not reign and rule for the powerful, for the comforted, for those who have plenty of help already; the psalmist has discovered, with joy, that God reigns and rules for the weak, for the wretched, for the marginalized, for the helpless, for the lowly, for the poor.

The psalmist’s own discovery—that God listens to the lowly and the afflicted—this means that this personal experience of deliverance matters not only for the psalmist but for everyone, for all the world, even for those not yet born. This song of praise, which we have as our Psalm in Unison, is a vision of expanding praise—including everyone, the strong and the weak, the living and the dead, today and tomorrow—and, for the psalmist, praise simply must open and expand because of this discovery that changes everything: “If there’s hope for me,” the psalmist discovers, “there’s hope for you and hope for everyone.”

The psalmist’s experience of rescue becomes a testimony that the living God—the God of Israel—listens to the lowly and leaves no one hopeless. The psalmist’s rescue showed that God’s reign is so merciful, so compassionate, so wide—that the promise of hope is for everyone. And we can share, with joy, in the psalmist’s discovery that if there’s hope for the lowly then there’s hope for all. As the psalmist offers this song of praise and declares that “dominion belongs to the LORD,” the psalmist’s witness resounds as hope for the hopeless. In this experience of misery turned to joy, the psalmist has glimpsed that the reign of God includes “God’s work of protecting those who are vulnerable” (Creach)—revealing hope, not only for the psalmist but for everyone, even across space and time. “The LORD reigns”—and so the frightened may take courage; “The LORD reigns”—and so the weak may find strength; “The LORD reigns”—and so the lowly may be lifted up.

In the memory of the church, this psalm—taken up by Christ and uttered from the cross—this psalm is intertwined with our understanding of the identity and work of Christ. And so, historically, the church has read this psalm in light of Christ; yet the connection between Christ and this psalm is so profound that, in addition to understanding this psalm in light of Christ, we might also understand Christ in light of this psalm (Mays)—especially as we read this, in the church, in this season of Easter. The psalmist’s misery was met by God’s rescue—in such a way that, as the psalmist discovered with joy, this rescue gave hope to people anywhere; Christ’s misery on Good Friday was met by God’s rescue on Easter Sunday—in such a way that his rescue—his resurrection—reveals hope for people everywhere. In the life of the psalmist, as in the life of Christ, misery gives way to joy and praise—because the God who reigns is the God who rescues.

“For dominion belongs to the LORD,” says the psalmist (v. 28). Thanks be to God. Amen.