

Is It Not Written in Your Law, "...You Are Gods?"

Psalms 8 and 82

I began this morning with the children and I will continue with you where we began last week, which was with the Jewish holiday of Hanukkah. Strangely, Hanukkah was only mentioned once in all 66 books of the Bible, and it was never mentioned in the entire Old Testament. The only place Hanukkah is mentioned is in the Gospel of John, chapter 10, where we find Jesus challenged by the authorities and teaching about leadership while he was on the temple porch in the Holy City, in the winter to observe Hanukkah.

And I read to you last week, where the rulers of the temple surrounded Jesus on the temple porch and said, "*How long will you keep our souls in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly!*" Which Jesus refused to do, because they were the rulers of the temple and he knew they weren't asking him this so they could bow at his feet and hand him the keys and turn the place over to him. So he fielded the question by telling them the truth. I've already told you, Jesus said, I've already shown you who I am, but "*...you don't believe me because you're not from my sheep.*"

You see the Israelites were descended from shepherding people and so it was in their tradition to think of themselves as sheep and their rulers, their kings as shepherds. And Jesus had talked a lot to these people about shepherds and sheep, but they never got what he was getting at, because they couldn't imagine that a carpenter from Galilee would be called by God as a king, as their shepherd, because at that moment they were in charge, the rulers thought they were the shepherds of God's people.

So Jesus took them on another tour of the sheepfold. "*My sheep,*" Jesus said, "*hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me,*" . And from there, Jesus proceeds to claim things that no king of Israel had ever claimed, "*I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand.*" And where does a carpenter from Galilee get off saying such things? Jesus explains, "*My Father, who has given [the sheep] to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. I and the Father are one.*"

Well, that tore it, that sent the temple crowd out into the plaza, tearing up paving stones to bludgeon Jesus to death right then and there during the Hanukkah festival. But the rulers knew and the crowd knew that Jesus had done a world of good, healing and feeding and helping God's people. So Jesus reminds them that he's no common lunatic they can easily kill in a riot. But they stand there with their pavers in their hands and tell Jesus he ought to die because he's just made himself Co-Shepherd with the Almighty. Which sent Jesus on a strange tangent from God's Word which people in his day had long forgotten, that God had originally put us humans here to reign over his creation in his company.

"I and the Father are one." Jesus said. In other words, he was the human shepherd God sent for his people because, since Adam fell, no other man had been one with the Father. No other man knew God and could live and teach the light and truth that lived in the Father's heart, but Jesus. But in the beginning, before the Fall, God had invested in all of us, men and women together, the ability and the responsibility to be at one with him and to rule the world and govern each other in a way that reflected the light and truth and goodness that lived in God's heart. We were made to be at one with God and to rule the world and to govern each other accordingly.

David had said so in the psalm we read as our Call to Worship this morning. In Psalm 6, David looked into the night sky, as he had in Psalm 19, and he saw in the moon and stars and planets the physical picture God had painted of the spiritual heavens, crowded with shining heavenly beings, angels and archangels depicted as stars holding their place in the dark sky, stable and reliable guides, but also up there were the planets, symbolizing demons and arch-deacons, the gods of the pagans, wandering restlessly and leading astray anyone who would seek to navigate by them. David looked up and saw the night sky as a physical picture of spiritual heaven and he sang to God: *"When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him and the son of man that you care for him. Yet you have made him little lower than the gods..."*

So David looked into heaven, with its brilliant lights and vast expanses, and he looked at himself. We are so small, so frail, ten toes, ten fingers, earthbound creatures, and yet David knew that inside men and women was a spark from God that belonged up there. So he sang to God: *"You have crowned man with glory and honor. You have given him dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under his feet."* In an age when humanity was not that far out of the hunter-gatherer phase of our history, David saw things like animal husbandry and horticulture with a sort of wonder, a fulfillment of the mastery God ordained for Adam when God had the first man name the creatures all around him.

And David sang the names, *"sheep and oxen, beasts...and birds, fish of the sea"* and he went on to sing of the huge and indescribable sea monsters that passed under keels of those fragile wooden galleys that men in David's day had only recently begun to take out to sea. So David had read Moses' words from Genesis and knew that God had made us like him, like the angels. God ordained us to be rulers sent from heaven, doing for God in the physical realm something like what the faithful angels were given to do in the heavens. And we've seen in the last month that David knew from personal experience all about Fall and Sin and the tragedy and absurdity that follows in the wake of human failure and evil.

But even so he continued to believe in and worship God for the essential beauty and authority that God invested in every human soul. And in the New Testament, in the second chapter of the

book of Hebrews, we read that what David wrote in Psalm 6 about men and the son of man was a prophecy that finds its fulfillment in the quintessential human being, Jesus Christ. It is Jesus who will lead men and women like us back to the “*glory and honor*” God gave us in Genesis. Jesus is the shepherd, the son of man, who will teach men and women like us to exercise a wise and good “*dominion*” over earth and sea and space, to do things we have only attempted with fits and starts and violence and chaos since the Fall.

Which brings us back to Jesus at Hanukkah, facing down a crowd of his own countrymen with stone pavers in their hands, trying to explain to them that what he’s said about being their Shepherd and being one with God is only part and parcel with how God meant for all of us to live in his good creation. And I suppose given the circumstances we can forgive Jesus for singing from a psalm that is not quite so optimistic as what David had sung in Psalm 6. Jesus looks to Psalm 82 which was written some centuries after David by a man named Asaph who lived in an era when the rulers of Israel had lost their way and their pagan neighbors were beginning to run amuck.

Asaph saw and sang of a vision where he saw God descended into one of the great throne rooms from which oriental despots ruled their realms. “*God has taken his stand in the assembly of the gods, in the midst of the gods he holds judgment.*” It would have sounded less odd to ancient ears to hear the rulers of their day described as gods. Because, in those days pagan tyrants typically imagined that they were gods. In fact, most of them claimed to be descended from some god who roamed the night sky. So God confronts them over the exercise of their godlike powers.

“*How long,*” God asks them, “*will you judge unjustly and show favor to the wicked? Give justice to the weak and fatherless; maintain the right of the afflicted and destitute. Rescue the weak and needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked.*” So this was God the Father wishing that human kings could live and rule with some concept of the light and truth and compassion that lived in God’s own heart.

In human realms, then and now, wealth and power and connections and manipulation and charm are what typically get things done in the halls of power. Because human attention and affection and favors are given to those people who can pay us back for what we invest in them. But love from God’s heart, God’s love and favor is on offer to people from every status in life who are universally unable to do a thing for God except love him back and then extend his kind of love to people who don’t necessarily appeal to us and don’t have favors to offer us. Unlike God, we generally only have time for people who meet our needs and suit our fancy.

So in Psalm 82, God issues a scathing judgment against human kings and princes who imagine that they are anything like God themselves. God sings about them: “*They have neither*

knowledge nor understanding; they walk about in darkness, and all the foundations of the earth are shaken.” The point being that when men and women in power only serve themselves, only weigh what’s good for them, only listen to their own friends and partisans, “*the foundations of the earth are shaken*”. All of society begins to shake and wobble like a big old building about to come down in an earthquake.

So what God saw in the royal courts and throne rooms of old Israel and her neighbors was a far cry from the “*glory and honor*” he had originally bestowed on the human race. So God sings sadly to the human princes who had become despots, “*I said, ‘You are gods, sons of the Most High, all of you.’ But you will die like men and fall like any human prince.*” What God was singing was that David was right, Jesus is right. From the get go, God invested a spark of heaven in every human heart and mind, we were made to love like God, rule like God, to live as one with God.

So Jesus quotes what God sang in Asaph’s vision to the rulers of his day. Jesus had lived out the quintessential human calling, he was that king, that shepherd God called all of us to be, and there they were with pavers in their hands, ramping up to kill him. Was it some crime that Jesus declared himself one with the Father?

He said to them, “*Did God not say[to you] in your Law. ‘I said, you are gods’? If he called them gods to whom the word of God was given - and Scripture cannot be broken - do you say of [me] whom God consecrated and sent into the world, ‘You are blaspheming because I said, ‘I am the Son of God’?*” The point being this, that we won’t understand what Jesus came here to do, and we won’t find our place in the work of the kingdom unless we get past our narrow overly correct view of what religion is for and see the big picture that God painted for us in the night sky.

So fearful were the Pharisees then, and modern fundamentalists today that they won’t translate Psalm 6 or Psalm 82 to say that men and women are called to rule the world and govern each other something like gods, those spiritual, heavenly beings that the ancients thought of and sometimes worshiped as gods. Jesus isn’t arguing that the first and second commandments be set aside here. There is only one true God who made us and who can save us, and only he should ever be worshipped. “*Scripture cannot be broken...*” Jesus said to the men who were about to stone him.

But part of what Scripture teaches is that we have a high calling, that God invested something godlike in the human heart and mind. And though we are fallen and sinful, we are responsible to return to God and to let him save us and change us so that we live out the purity and wisdom and compassion and selflessness that we learn in God’s company, first in our marriages and family,

then in church, then at our work, and then in society all around us, in our politics, where we party and play, in the things we do to enrich our own lives and the world around us.

This calling to live like God, rule like God, serve like God, love like God in the flesh and blood brick and mortar world is so much more than the private, personal experience so many modern Christians want to have with God. There is a whole system of relationships, founded in family and church, that cannot be bypassed if we're ever going to be right with God. There is a whole set of priorities and disciplines that must be learned from God's Word, if our lives are ever going to make sense and make good. And it isn't what comes naturally, what fits our subjective sense of how the world should work. Moses labored his whole life to bring his temper into tow, and the Scripture says about him that he became the meekest man on earth, even though the same book, Numbers, shows Moses in a fit of temper that cost him his place in the Promised Land. The Bible says about David both that he was a man after God's own heart and that he was guilty of spectacular sins. But God redeemed them both and they are remembered as godlike because they saw in the night sky their destiny and trusted God, and did what they could to live it out here and now.