

Psalm 97:5

Advent 1 Midweek • December 6, 2006
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church • Boise, Idaho
Pastor Tim Pauls
“At the Presence of the Lord”

The Word of the Lord from Psalm 97:5: “The mountains melt like wax at the presence of the LORD, At the presence of the Lord of the whole earth.” This is the Word of the Lord.

“The mountains melt like wax at the presence of the LORD.” That’s a lot of power. In fact, the first few verses of Psalm 97 are full of descriptions of God’s power. “Clouds and thick darkness surround Him.” “A fire goes before Him and burns up His enemies round about.” “His lightnings light the world; the earth sees and trembles.” That sort of language would take the psalm’s first hearers back to God’s mighty acts during the Exodus. There was the time when He descended in a thick cloud upon Mt. Sinai to give the Ten Commandments to His people through Moses. There were the times when the Lord consumed with fire those who profaned His worship, such as the sons of Aaron or the sons of Korah. The Lord was present with His people, demonstrating His protection with mighty acts of power. And where men opposed His works and will, He demonstrated His power in mighty acts of judgment. He wasn’t some pillar of stone or wood with a face carved by followers: Yahweh was a living God at work to save His people, a very present help in trouble.

Throughout the Old Testament, the people of God called upon Him for help. Sometimes, He responded with forcefulness, with direct destruction of evil; and while the people sometimes rejoiced, His displays of power often terrified them. Sometimes instead of direct force, He sent judges or prophets or kings as His instruments. One can look back through Old Testament history, point to here and to there, and aided by that Word say, “Look at God, powerfully at work to deliver His people.”

But here is an important truth: power does not always mean visible force or destruction. Power can be hidden. It can be exercised in generosity, not in force. It can be a powerful mercy, rather than a powerful blow. Such power rarely makes the news. I bring this up because the Lord has certainly saved you by His work, by His power: but He shows this power to you chiefly in mercy and pity. For if you want to see the Lord powerfully present to deliver you from sin and death, then listen to this passage from Luke 1 once again:

³⁰Then the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹"And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name JESUS. ³²"He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David. ³³"And He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end." (Luke 1:30-33)

So was the Incarnation, the becoming flesh, of Jesus. Gabriel spoke God's Word to Mary, and she conceived the Messiah by the Holy Ghost. We may hastily glance past this story as we hustle headlong to the manger in Bethlehem, but note what the Lord has done there. By His Word, the Virgin has conceived a Son, her honor still pure and intact, a miracle never otherwise known. That is enough for meditation for a long time, but there is more: the Child in her womb, conceived and borne in time by her, was begotten of the Father from all eternity. He is both God and man, fully both. And that leads us to a third truth on which we should stop and think: that unborn Child, clinically described these days as an embryo, is fully almighty God. He is all-knowing. All-powerful. Even then, He can melt mountains with His presence. He can burn up His enemies with fire. He can make the earth tremble simply by His being.

But He doesn't do so. While He could arrange for the most luxurious of palaces, He instead wills to be born in poverty and laid in a manger—and except for a burst of glory when angels sing to shepherds, there's little powerful stuff to disturb the sleep of the people in Bethlehem. In His infancy, Jesus permits a tin-pan king named Herod to chase Him out of town to Egypt for a while. He grows up in little Nazareth. Eventually, He drags a cross up a hill and dies on it after a few hours of agony. Barring some miracles and a private Transfiguration along the way, there's little power to be seen in the life of Jesus.

And that misleads many to believe that Jesus isn't good for much more than a good story, a nice example of behavior or a punch line that can't defend Himself. But you know better. From Scripture, you know that He is the Son of God, become flesh for you. You know that He veils His power and glory as He works for your salvation. And you know that He displays His power toward you chiefly in mercy and grace. Throughout His journey to Calvary, He is bearing the sins and infirmities of the world to the cross, and that without complaint. He works in powerful meekness, serving the poor and the sick rather than demanding service and worship. He defeats the devil in the wilderness by speaking His powerful Word. He endures the scorn of the world as He hangs on the cross. Three days later, He appears to His followers, because He has conquered even death and grave.

Oh, yes: this Jesus is the powerful Lord who can melt mountains with His presence. But for you, He demonstrates His power in mercy and grace. But the meekness and humility of His work do not mean that He is weak or failing. He has died and He is risen—and He will raise you from the dead.

So as we journey through this Advent season, I offer you two pleas.

The first is about the holiday season: already we are overrun by the commercial side of Christmas, by the insistence that the season is all about the right gifts, the celebrations of family and friends, those powerful emotional rewards portrayed in commercials and classic movies. Sometimes, those are within our grasp, and for that we give thanks to God. But many will be misled to believe that this is the force of the holiday, that Christmas is well-celebrated when we are satisfied with our festivities. For others,

because of poverty or grief or worry, those powerful emotions and bonds are out of reach; and they will believe that the holiday is a failure because they saw only the absence of joy.

I pray that you might have a joy-filled holiday season, but remember that this is not to be confused with the Lord's work for you. The holiday is a holy day because of the Infant in the manger, His power concealed in swaddled flesh and blood. To focus on human celebration is to miss the point of Christmas—that God has become man for your salvation. Set aside time to read through John 1, Luke 1 and 2, and Matthew 1 as well. Set aside precious time to ponder the miracle you see there: the God who melts mountains is born of Mary for you.

The second plea extends well beyond the holiday season, and it is this: remember that the God who melts mountains works demonstrates His power in mercy and meekness for you, and His work is often hidden beneath trial and suffering. When troubled and raw with anxiety, you'll want to demand that God do something powerful to save you immediately; and you'll want to accuse God of failing you if He does not deliver you through a mighty act, right then and there. At such times, remember how the Lord has worked for your salvation. For your sake, He humbly endured poverty, scorn and even the cross—patiently accepting the suffering in order to deliver you. If that is how this world treated the only-begotten Son of God, you and I should not be surprised when we are touched by such sufferings, too. But your troubles most certainly have an end, because you are a beloved child of Him who both melts mountains and has died for your deliverance.

You'll be tempted to believe that God is where you can see powerful things, that those who promise powerful miracles and guarantee mountaintop experiences are true prophets of Christ. But remember the Lord who works through manger and cross to deliver you. Remember where He has promised to be for you: in His Word and in His Sacraments. There may be glorious sights and wonders to be witnessed in this world, but the Lord does not promise to be in them. On the other hand, the Word made flesh declares that He is present in His life-giving Word. He declares He joins you to His death and resurrection in Holy Baptism, so that you have eternal life even now. He tells you that He gives you Himself in His Supper, for the forgiveness of sins.

After all, given enough time and explosive materials, man can remove a mountain; but only the Lord has removed your sins, and that at the cost of His own holy, precious blood. Given enough force and firepower, man can fight his enemy and send him to death. But only Jesus Christ has defeated death and the grave, in order to raise you up forever; and He has done so not by a show of naked power, but by His humble, innocent suffering and death. He speaks His forgiveness to you: and that deliverance is gentle and humble, because the fierce fight to win it has already been fought at the cross.

“The mountains melt like wax at the presence of the LORD, At the presence of the Lord of the whole earth.” That's a lot of power, and this is most certainly true: the Lord, whose presence melts mountains like wax, is present with you. But as the strongest and

fiercest of warriors might hold his infant child tenderly in his arms, so the Lord cradles you by His grace. He does not deal with you in terrifying power, but He comes to you humbly with forgiveness and life. He has meekly conquered sin, death and devil for you, and He delivers that victory to you in those quiet, humble, eternally powerful words: “I forgive you all of your sins.”

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen