

God's Sovereignty – Bob Munshaw

Isaiah 64:1-9; Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19; 1 Corinthians 1:3-9; Mark 13:24-37

Last week, Mariah helped us to remember and reflect on the fact that Christ is King. This week, we enter into the Advent season—a time when we prepare for the coming of the King. Brian Hartley is not here, and so cannot hold my feet to the fire in terms of not yet talking about Christmas. Thus, as we are only a few weeks from Christmas, I thought I would share one of my favorite Christmas poems with a couple major adaptations.

Twas not the night before Christmas ... but still, all through the house, not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse. The stockings were not hung by the chimney with care ... 'cause it was not the night before Christmas. I already mentioned that. But, it was dark and cold and the dead of night, and all six Munshaws were tucked snug in their beds. There was no hope that St. Nicholas would soon be there ... 'cause as I mentioned twice before, it was not the night before Christmas.

But I did awake on this eve to a terrible clatter, and indeed I did wonder what was the matter. What I awoke to that night was the sound of shattering glass. I was in my bedclothes ... which I will not describe at this time ... and I did indeed spring from my bed to see what was the matter. I grabbed what was close at hand. Sadly, I did not have a hockey stick in my room. But I did have a hammer. And with hammer brandished over my shoulder, I slowly descended the steps one by one. We had a split-level home in Saskatoon, so the stairs turned the corner about halfway down ... and I could not see what might be waiting for me. Was it a prowler? Was it the boogey man? As this story was taking place in Canada ... could it even be that a sasquatch was awaiting me in that basement?

The hairs on my neck rose on end as I rounded the corner with my hammer ... and saw ... nothing. But, surely there was something down there that had caused such a racket. Still, there was no cold air rushing through the room, there was no sound to be heard (besides the beating of mine own heart). When I turned on the light, and searched the room hammer in hand, there was nothing.

Well, there was something ... what had caused such a racket in my basement that night was indeed the trusty hammer that I was holding. For the shattering of glass that night was merely a picture that had fallen from the wall.

I returned to my snug bed, thankful that night ... thankful in a way that I, and perhaps we, rarely take time to think of, thankful for so many things that we take for granted ... thankful that my family was fine and safe, that I had not needed to use my hammer ... which I'm sure would have been useless against a trespasser, especially if the trespasser had been a sasquatch.

But we live in a world where sometimes the things that go bump in the night are not pictures falling, or our roommates falling out of bed. Sometimes, tragedy strikes in our

lives and in our world, and we are left to wonder where God is, and if God cares. This is true of personal loss and grief, and I am old enough now, and have lived long enough to know that one does not live a life devoid of loss and pain. In fact, grief and hardship can be constant companions in life. Sometimes, we get strange notions, or we hear that if we just follow Jesus, our lives will be smooth sailing. We will be recused from all hardships. But that does not fit with the teachings and experience of the Bible. You look at people like Job, or the apostle Paul, both pretty godly men according to the Scriptures, and find that both had all sorts of pain to endure. Job's life was an ancient-day country music song ... the kind where the singer loses his wife, his pick-up, his girlfriend, and even his dog runs off. Paul, the great apostle and missionary talks in 2nd Corinthians about all the times he was jailed, whipped, shipwrecked, stoned, hungry and cold, on top of being worried for the people of the many churches that he had worked with. No, sometimes in this world, the things that go bump in the night in our personal lives can be very real, and they can be heartbreaking

Then, we think about the greater world. While this last few days has hopefully been spent with loved ones enjoying the three f's of American Thanksgiving (food, football and family), we can't forget Monday's verdict in the Darren Wilson case, and the subsequent rioting, and we recognize that we are certainly in a sinful and fallen world.

In this world, we are often left feeling confused, angry, scared, and perhaps helpless. I look at my feed on Facebook, and the many articles on both sides of the issues. One thing I do know is that the issues are far more complex than some people want to make them out to be, and that as a privileged, white Canadian, I am an ignorant jerk if I assume that I can understand justice issues that are literally hundreds of years in the making. I do know this, though. We need God. We need God's discernment. We need God's wisdom. Perhaps more than anything else, we need God's grace and love as we do life with each other.

Sometimes, in days like these, we may feel like the author of Isaiah 64. *O that you would tear open the heavens and come down so that the mountains would quake at your presence ... Make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence.* What we hear this Isaiah saying is: The world is out of control. God, do something!!

According to Dennis Bratcher, Isaiah 64 is a prayer of lament. These prayers were often used liturgically by the Israelite people in corporate worship settings. Bratcher writes: *Generally, a lament is a prayer that cries out to God from the midst of desperate grief, pain, or any circumstance that seems out of control. It vocalizes the hurt to God with the conviction, the faith, that God can and will bring relief. A lament is not just the venting of frustration, but is a profound statement of faith in God from the midst of utter human hopelessness. The significance of a lament is that the worshipper prays in the midst of his pain. He believes that God cares about His condition and he has enough faith in God to trust Him with the outcome.*

This prayer of lament actually begins at Isaiah 63:7, where the author first reminds his hearers that they can and should have trust in God because of the way that God has worked in their past. The second half of chapter 63 is focused around complaint to God. Most commentators feel that this prayer was written after the Israelites had returned to the Holy Land from exile. You may remember from your readings in Ezra and Nehemiah that this was a hard time for the returning exiles.

Local people had moved into the homes and lands of the exiles. The Israelite people had been in captivity for over 40 years, and so others moved in on their lands; these people were hardly excited to be driven back out when the Israelites returned to reclaim their lands. So, not surprisingly, we find the locals pestering the returning Jewish exiles. To get a sense of perspective, think of Israel being made a nation state again in 1948, and the wars and turmoil that have gone on in the Holy Land since that time.

The opponents of the returning exiles taunted them about the weakness of the wall they were repairing. They made plans to attack Jerusalem. There was a constant sense of tension and fear for this group of returned exiles. As they repaired the gaps in the city walls, they were forced to stand guard over each other with sword and bow.

It was a perilous time for the returned exiles, and this prayer of lament from Isaiah would have fit well with their circumstances. God, show up and do something. Show your power in our midst. Help us! This prayer is still relevant for us today as it navigates a recognition of who God is, the need we have for forgiveness, and the need we have for help from God both to intervene in our circumstances and to mold us as the work of God's hand. While they seemed frustrated with God, this was also a people that truly believed that God cares and is at work in this world. This is a people that believed that God is sovereign.

Our text from Mark continues the idea of God's sovereignty. It is the concluding section of what is often called Jesus' Olivet Discourse. I think that's because he gave it at Olivet Nazarene as opposed to at Greenville. Okay... that was just silly. In the midst of these days, as Christians, it is important for us to turn to God's word and invite God to speak into our lives. This strange, apocalyptic text that is assigned for this Sunday strikes me as apropos for this moment. The scene is set at the beginning of chapter 13. The Mount of Olives is actually located just east of Old Jerusalem. It has been used as a burial ground for over 3000 years, and holds over 150,000 graves. While not particularly high, at about 2700 feet, the slopes of the Mount of Olives were once covered with olive groves. Here a conversation takes place between Jesus and Peter, James, John and Andrew. And here Jesus gives this cosmic message that fits so well with last Sunday's reminder that Christ is King.

Chapter 14 covers the last supper, and the betrayal and trial of Jesus. So this Olivet Discourse is one of the last intimate talks that Jesus has with some of his key followers before his time on earth comes to a close. And what does he tell them? Keep Alert! Beware! Be Awake! Just as Jesus came as the Messiah 2000 years ago, he, as the Son of Man, will one day return with great power and glory ... and no one will know the time of

his coming. It may be soon. The title “Son of Man” that Jesus uses for himself here is a bit of a cryptic Old Testament title. In Daniel, it indicates a figure that would judge the world at the end of time. And this is how it appears that Jesus is using it to describe himself both here and in Matthew 25, when he gives the parable of the sheep and the goats. Jesus is clearly saying something about his second advent here in Mark 13, but what?

There have been plenty of people that would come up to me, especially when I was pastoring, saying, “Don’t you think that all of these signs, these earthquakes and wars, are pointing out that Jesus will soon be returning?” ... and my response has always been that I have no idea—maybe/maybe not. People have speculated about the return of Christ almost since the time that Jesus ascended to heaven. Jesus says here that not the angels, not even he (in his human form) knows the day or hour he will return. But, still, he says: be alert.

At our home in Saskatoon, we were hardly alert for a burglar. You always know that it is possible ... but we never expected it. Then, when the picture broke, and we thought that someone was in our basement, it was almost shocking. We were not prepared at all.

So, one day Christ will return. We do not know what that will totally look like, but, for now, we are in an in-between time. But are we prepared? Is God’s work at the end of time—is God’s work in our lives and our world today—something that we anticipate with a sense of hope? Do we expect that as truly the Sovereign Lord, God will be at work?

I think that the apostle, Paul, in our 1st Corinthians text, gives us some good grist to chew on for this time of waiting. We, in the community of Christians, have been given God’s grace. This is a reason for us to continue to live thankful lives, even when we face trials and hardships of many kinds. Paul writes that we are being enriched by God. We have been given spiritual gifts for the work of the kingdom. We are promised that Christ will strengthen us. God is at work in our midst in the midst of this in-between time, for this time of waiting for the coming of our savior. And so we can live with hope, even when our lives, or our world, seem so full of hardship and chaos.

The Advent Season is one in which we prepare our hearts for the arrival of our coming Sovereign King. Brian Hartley is right that we are not yet at Christmas. It really is not time for the parties. It is a time to quiet our hearts. It is a time to reflect.

But as we wait, we wait with hope. We wait with hope because we believe that God is indeed sovereign; we wait with hope, because God is with us. We wait with hope because God holds this world in his capable hands no matter how bad/rough things seem to be. And as we wait, we are called to use the gifts that God has given us to work ... to live in the reality of His presence ... to be the peace and joy that is so needed in this world, because Immanuel—God is with us.