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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
The 21st Sunday after Pentecost, October 22, 2023
Psalm 96

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Maker of heaven and earth is also the Maker of all humanity, including people who do not yet know him. It is fitting, then, that today's Bible readings are kind ones toward the world — not just toward Israel and not just toward the Church, but also toward people who do not yet know and worship our God.

So, in our Gospel Lesson Jesus gives his famous teaching about paying taxes to the Roman Empire:

Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's,
and to God the things that are God's. (Matthew 22:21,
RSV)

We should understand this rule as giving first place to God. And yet it leaves open the possibility that the Roman Empire has legitimate claims too.

Likewise with our First Bible Lesson from Isaiah. The LORD is addressing himself to Cyrus, King of the Persian Empire. He is approaching in a friendly way the king of an empire that does not yet know him. The LORD says that he has anointed Cyrus:

Thus says the LORD to his anointed, to Cyrus,
whose right hand I have grasped,
to subdue nations before him
and ungird the loins of kings,
to open doors before him
that gates may not be closed: (Isaiah 45:1, RSV)

Later in the reading, the LORD clarifies that he is favoring Cyrus for the sake of Israel. Still, we can see that the LORD is focused on Cyrus and has a good use for him, which, I guess, is about as much as any of us could want.

But it is chiefly in today's Psalm that we can see that the LORD is up to something good — something that will benefit the whole world. We can find this theme in the opening two verses:

¹Sing to the LORD a new song;
sing to the LORD, *all the whole earth*.
²Sing to the LORD and bless his name;

proclaim the good news of his salvation from day to day. (Psalm 96:1-2, LBW, my emphasis)

This whole Psalm invites the world to rejoice in the LORD. Even the sea and fields and the forests are invited to join all the world in rejoicing. They are beautiful verses:

¹¹Let the heavens rejoice, and let the earth be glad;
let the sea thunder and all that is in it;
let the field be joyful and all that is therein.
¹²Then shall all the trees of the wood shout for joy
before the LORD when he comes,
when he comes to judge the earth.
¹³He will judge the world with righteousness
and the peoples with his truth. (Psalm 96:11-13, LBW)

That is what we want. We should want that at last there shall come an everlasting King who will judge things with righteousness and truth. Isaiah's promise here is meant for all humanity.

It is this Psalm 96 that I want to lift up this morning. It seems to include in it some of the things we can find in our other Bible readings.

The first thing I want you to notice is a typographical matter. So, I ask you to look at our Psalm in our worship folder. This is a big deal for me. Notice the printing of the name of Israel's God. It is printed as "the LORD," with the word "LORD" in small caps. This is a convention that goes back at least as far as the King James Bible. Notice it throughout the Bible. Notice the *particular* claim the Bible is making against all other gods. This matter of small caps is a convention of courtesy. No, more than that. It is a convention of honor and respect for Israel's awe before the name of her God — an awe so profound that Israel put the actual speaking and writing of the holy name under interdict. Only on the most holy of occasions might the blessed name be spoken. The King James Bible and other English Bibles in that tradition follow Israel's convention in not writing the actual name of her God. Instead, our Bibles use the typographical method of using "the LORD" in small caps to refer to the actual name of Israel's God. That actual name was revealed to Abraham long ago. But to this day, we follow Israel in not speaking or writing that name.

Nonetheless, we should understand that "the LORD" refers to one particular God — the God who is the Maker of heaven and earth, and the God who rescued Israel from bondage in Egypt. Israel knew that her neighbors worshiped other gods. Israel knew all about Marduk and Rei and Isis and would not be surprised to learn about Jupiter and Juno and Pan. But Israel did not care about those other gods. Here she was, a tiny nation on earth, aware

that other, bigger nations had their own gods. But she did not care a hoot about them. In fact, she believed that they were not real. She believed that they were just wood and metal. And so, in this Psalm 96, Israel is making it clear that someday, all the earth would rejoice in Israel's God — the LORD. Count the references to "the LORD" in our Psalm. I believe that there are eleven of them in our short Psalm. Eleven times Israel preaches to the world that someday, the whole world would rejoice before her God, "the LORD":

¹⁰Tell it out among the nations: "The LORD is king!
He has made the world so firm that it cannot be moved;
he will judge the peoples with equity." (Psalm 96:10, LBW)

The LORD is king. Not Marduk. Not Zeus. Not money. Not fame. Not every shifting wind of doctrine. The LORD is king.

In the Church, we go ahead and blurt out the holy name. We believe that our God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is the same God as "the LORD." Israel, by and large, does not agree with us. Still, we inherit the Psalm's view that one day, all of humanity will rejoice before God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

All right. Let me turn to the Psalm itself. Let me focus on verse 9 in our Psalm. It speaks of "the beauty of holiness."

⁹Worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness;
let the whole earth tremble before him. (Psalm 96:9, LBW)

My father was a Protestant preacher who became Catholic. Here at Immanuel, we have some acquaintance with that pattern because three of our pastors in the past became Catholics: Richard John Neuhaus, Raymond Schulze, and Leonard Klein. For a Protestant preacher to become Catholic was probably even more surprising back in the days when my father became Catholic. He had been a preacher in what is called the "Pilgrim Holiness Church." Carol's father also was a preacher, but he was a true blue Lutheran, from beginning to end. So Carol grew up in a Lutheran household and never heard of that little part of the Wesleyan tradition called the "Pilgrim Holiness Church." But when she did hear of it, her immediate comment was, "What a lovely name for a church. Pilgrim Holiness Church."

She liked the idea of a pilgrim on this earth who tries to walk in holiness of life. So do I. I left behind much of the theology of the Pilgrim Holiness Church long ago, but the image of the pilgrim seeking a holy life... that image remains powerful for me. It is Biblical:

⁹Worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness;
let the whole earth tremble before him. (Psalm 96:9, LBW)

It is a remarkable phrase. It connects an aesthetic quality – beauty – with a moral quality – holiness.¹ Let’s look at both words. First, what is “holiness”? Here at Immanuel we have the advantage of our Confession service at the start of the liturgy to help us along. The old familiar words give us a round-about way of describing “holiness.” The words go this way:

Most merciful God, we confess that we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves. We have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done and by what we have left undone. We have not loved you with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. For the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ, have mercy on us. Forgive us, renew us, and lead us, so that we may delight in your will and walk in your ways, to the glory of your holy name. Amen.

Here we confess that during this past week, we have failed to live a holy life. We have failed in two ways — by our sins and by our failures of love. There is sin we should have avoided, but failed to avoid. We have sinned in thought, word, and deed. That covers a lot of ground. We might have avoided crime and other wicked deeds, but still we are liable to sin in our thoughts or in our words. So, that is part of our failure to live a holy life. Too much sin. But the other half of our failure is that there is something good that we should have done, but fell short of: We failed to love the Lord with our whole heart. We also failed to love our neighbors as ourselves.

So, these are two features of a holy life: We turn *away* from sin, and we turn *to* love. That makes for a good life. That makes for a holy life. Mother Teresa, for example, did that to a remarkable degree. So do all the saints, including quiet, humble saints the world little knows about.

The other half of our phrase speaks of beauty: the *beauty* of holiness. If no one else on the face of the earth should judge a holy life to be beautiful, our Maker does! The world might look on at Mother Teresa, for example, and see a small woman, just about worn-out by her ministry of charity to the poor and lepers of the world. But Almighty God looks at her and sees beauty.

What our Psalm is doing is bidding the whole world to give the LORD some beauty to behold. The LORD does not need to see beautiful sunsets. He can manufacture them on a thousand different planets. What he waits to see is a holy life. He waits for that in you and in me. He hopes to see us turn away

¹ I was helped at this point by reading some of this article, “The Beauty of Holiness,” by J. Prescott Johnson, place.asburyseminary.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=&httpsredir=1&article=1348&context=asburyjournal

from sin this coming week. He hopes to see us turn toward love this coming week.

And let us note this: walking in the beauty of holiness does not require spectacular deeds of piety. That is a strong theme in Martin Luther. Next Sunday is Reformation Sunday, and so it helps set the stage for that festival for us to listen to Luther for a bit. Let me lift up one of my favorite quotes from Luther about the beauty of quiet and humble holiness of life. He starts off by admitting that the daily life of obeying the Ten Commandments is nothing fancy in the eyes of the world:

It seems to me that we shall have our hands full to keep these commandments, practicing gentleness, patience, love toward enemies, chastity, kindness, etc., and all that is involved in doing so. But such works are not important or impressive in the eyes of the world. They are not uncommon and showy, reserved to certain special times, places, rites, and ceremonies, but are common, everyday domestic duties of one neighbor to another, with nothing glamorous about them. Those other deeds captivate all eyes and ears. Aided by great splendor, expense, and magnificent buildings, they are so adorned that everything gleams and glitters. There is burning of incense, singing and ringing of bells, lighting of candles and tapers until for all of this nothing else can be seen or heard. For when a priest stands in a golden chasuble, or a layperson spends a whole day in the church on his or her knees, that is considered a precious work that cannot be sufficiently extolled. But when a poor servant girl takes care of a little child or faithfully does what she is told, this is regarded as nothing.²

Well, this quiet, domestic life of the Ten Commandments might be regarded as nothing by the world, but it shines with the beauty of holiness in the eyes of our God.

Finally, we must pin it down that for Christians, holiness of life means walking with Jesus. It means walking with Jesus as we find him in the Bible — not an imaginary Jesus, but the one we find in the Bible. Likewise, turning from sin and toward love means love as we find it in the story of Jesus — not what we imagine love to be, but what it is as we see it in Jesus. This is the beautiful life. This is our obedience to the call of the Psalm so very long ago:

² Martin Luther, *The Large Catechism*, "Conclusion of the Ten Commandments." Kolb-Wengert Edition

⁹Worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness...(Psalm 96:9, LBW)

And so, to use Luther's example, the young woman who takes care of a sick child because she believes Jesus wants her to do so... well, that young woman shines with a beauty that brings joy to heaven. She shines with the beauty of holiness because of her daily attempt to walk with Jesus, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.