

Sermon July 15  
Ashland Brethren in Christ Church  
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Scripture Psalm 135, Luke 8:22-25

## **Introduction:**

Good morning,

The story goes that two young fish are swimming along, and they pass an old fish going the other way. The old fish nods his head as he passes and asks, “How’s the water today?” “Oh fine, fine,” they reply.

After swimming a little further away one young fish turns to the other and asks, “What in the world is water?”

This strikes me as a good parable for something I’ve been puzzling lately in the light of Pastor Keith’s current sermon series: Revival, Living the Gospel and Restoring the World. What IS revival anyhow? And, if we find ourselves in the middle of one, how would we know? The image of revival that Pastor Keith used at church board is from the song by Robin Mark:

“I feel it in my spirt, feel it in my bones,  
You’re going to send revival, bring them all back home.  
I can hear the thunder in the distance,  
Like a train on the edge of the town.  
I can feel the brooding of your spirt,  
Lay your burdens down.”

He used it to point to the feeling that there is something God is preparing ABC for – and it’s just around the corner, we can’t quite see what it is yet. What are we being prepared for and whenever “it” arrives will we be ready? Those are questions we have been exploring in our discussions on Church Board and that Pastor Keith has been exploring in this sermon series. My goal is to connect this vision of revival with the idea of worship and how the two go hand in hand.

Which brings us back to the fish.

The implication here is that the old fish, having seen plenty, traveled far, and learned much, is wise to the world. He knows what water he is swimming in – he has seen it change through years and seasons – he knows how this water compares. The young fish, by contrast, are so young, so naive, that they don’t even know what water is.

Before we judge the young fish too much we should remember that we often cannot see where we are in the waters of history. People called WWI the war to end all wars. They did not know what was to happen 20 years later. We see things in retrospect that are practically invisible in the moment. This is a good thing to remember as we talk about revival. Historically revivals are marked by an increased enthusiasm for religion. The most famous revivals in America in the 1750s and later in the early 1800s, were famous for their huge tent meetings, preachers who would travel around the country, and who could go on for hours. People repented and joined churches by the thousands, whole new denominations sprung up and hundreds of new congregations.

There was also an air of enthusiasm for social good and morality. So this was not simply a bunch more people going to church on Sunday as a result of these revivals. These people were inspired to make their faith central to their whole lives. And that brought about massive social change. Schools, orphanages, the red cross, community welfare programs, women's suffrage, the abolition of slavery all of this grew out of a spirit of revival.

Of course, to the revivalists – they didn't wake up one day and say, "Well would you look at that! We are right in the middle of second great revival." No, they were far too excited about grabbing on to a movement - God's purpose for the world - and finding ways to take part in it.

What we need, in order to make sense of the water we swim in every day, is perspective. Is this water hotter or colder than yesterday, more salty or less? Is there an ebb and flow in the tide?

Perhaps I can say this another way. Look with me at the Luke passage that was read earlier.

Luke 8:22-25 -- <sup>22</sup> One day he got into a boat with his disciples, and he said to them, "Let us go across to the other side of the lake." So they set out, <sup>23</sup> and as they sailed he fell asleep. And a windstorm came down on the lake, and they were filling with water and were in danger. <sup>24</sup> And they went and woke him, saying, "Master, Master, we are perishing!" And he awoke and rebuked the wind and the raging waves, and they ceased, and there was a calm. <sup>25</sup> He said to them, "Where is your faith?" And they were afraid, and they marveled, saying to one another, "Who then is this, that he commands even winds and water, and they obey him?"

Jesus had, in this situation, a completely different perspective than his disciples: they were sure they were going to drown – he was confident that they were fine. Only later, when these same disciples were telling their stories to the world did they realize that Jesus was in control the whole time.

SO how do you get the right perspective, you ask? And that is the question isn't it? There may be more than one way. But like so many of life's questions we will find that we are not the first, nor will we be the last to ask them.

This brings us to our main passage for the day. Psalm 135

Now this psalm was probably one that the Jewish people during festivals like Passover, or Booths –when they remember the time they wandered in the desert, or even to celebrate the new year. So it was used frequently at formal occasions. Later Christian communities – specifically traditional liturgical ones would pair this psalm with 136 immediately after it. And 136 if you flip a page over is the one that has that constant refrain, “his love endures forever.” Together they sing of God's mercy and power in the history of the Hebrew People.

### **Psalm 135**

*Praise the LORD!*

*Praise the name of the LORD,*

*give praise, O servants of the LORD,*

<sup>2</sup> *who stand in the house of the LORD,*

*in the courts of the house of our God!* – [these first two verses bring you into God's presence by getting gradually more specific.]

<sup>3</sup> *Praise the LORD, for the LORD is good;*

*sing to his name, for it is pleasant!*

<sup>4</sup> *For the LORD has chosen Jacob for himself,*

*Israel as his own possession.* [and these two verses lay out the main theme – namely: WHY should you praise the LORD? Because he is good and has chosen us as his own.]

<sup>5</sup> *For I know that the LORD is great,*

*and that our Lord is above all gods.*

<sup>6</sup> *Whatever the LORD pleases, he does,*

*in heaven and on earth,*

*in the seas and all deeps.* [Here the psalmist explains that God is in charge from top to bottom, all the way down. Heaven, where God is, to earth, where we are, to the seas, where evil lurks, to all deeps - the bottom of the seas. This is drawing on the creation story where God forms good things out of the depths.]

It goes on to continue the theme of God's power:]

<sup>7</sup> *He it is who makes the clouds rise at the end of the earth,  
who makes lightnings for the rain  
and brings forth the wind from his storehouses.*

<sup>8</sup> *He it was who struck down the firstborn of Egypt,  
both of man and of beast;* [note here we switch from present tense (God is and makes and brings forth) to past tense this is something God DID.

<sup>9</sup> *who in your midst, O Egypt,  
sent signs and wonders  
against Pharaoh and all his servants;*

<sup>10</sup> *who struck down many nations  
and killed mighty kings,*

<sup>11</sup> *Sihon, king of the Amorites,  
and Og, king of Bashan,*

*and all the kingdoms of Canaan,* [What God did was rescue the Hebrews from slavery and then prepare the way for them, driving the pagan nations out so that the people could come to the promised inheritance, their heritage. By the way, people often get stuck on this part - where God violently drives out the nations to make room for Israelites. For us brought up in Sunday school learning about Jesus and the Good Samaritan and Paul saying that the gospel is for all nations this doesn't feel right, does it? More on this in a bit.]

<sup>12</sup> *and gave their land as a heritage,  
a heritage to his people Israel.*

<sup>13</sup> *Your name, O LORD, endures forever,  
your renown, O LORD, throughout all ages.*

<sup>14</sup> *For the LORD will vindicate his people  
and have compassion on his servants.*

<sup>15</sup> *The idols of the nations are silver and gold,  
the work of human hands.* [in comparison small, transient, powerless]

<sup>16</sup> *They have mouths, but do not speak;  
they have eyes, but do not see;*

<sup>17</sup> *they have ears, but do not hear,*

*nor is there any breath in their mouths.* [some translations say nostrils. This is again a reference to the creation story where God forms Adam out of dust and breathes life into him. And the psalmist laughs at the idea of a statue doing that with no breath to speak of.]

<sup>18</sup> *Those who make them become like them,*

*so do all who trust in them.* [It is important to remember that we as humans become like what we worship. If we worship God we will begin to reflect his qualities, if we worship anything else we will begin to be corrupted by its lifelessness.

<sup>19</sup> *O house of Israel, bless the LORD!*

*O house of Aaron, bless the LORD!*

<sup>20</sup> *O house of Levi, bless the LORD!*

*You who fear the LORD, bless the LORD!*

<sup>21</sup> *Blessed be the LORD from Zion,*

*he who dwells in Jerusalem!*

*Praise the LORD!* [This balances the first two verses which started general and get more specific. Here we do the same. We start with all of Israel, then the family of Aaron (who were priests) and house of Levi (who were the ones closest to the temple), and finally you. These last verses work with the first verses to provide bookends to the song. But as in many Hebrew Poems the most important point is in the middle and the stuff on either end supports it. In this case Verses 1-4 are the introduction, verses 19-21 is the conclusion - 7 lines in all. Then if you start at verse 5 and read 7 verses the next verse is verse 12. And if you count backwards from verse 18 – the 7<sup>th</sup> verse is also verse 12. It is there right in the middle.

<sup>12</sup> *and gave their land as a heritage,*

*a heritage to his people Israel.*

According to the writer here this is why the LORD is to be praised: he choose Israel as an heir. The Heritage, the Land, is less the point itself -- it isn't that God gave Israel a bunch of stuff. People get tied up on this when they get tied up on God driving out the nations and killing all the pagan kings. But that isn't the point. No, the point is that God choose this People for his own and made them like his children. This is the core of the Hebrew worldview – God's purpose for the whole world – his master plan to put things right after the fall of creation – was to pick a people, Israel – and like a father entrusts his estate to his son and heir, God entrusts Israel with the task of setting the world to rights. The symbol of sonship is the inheritance; but the blessing for this adopted people is that they were chosen to complete God's mission to restore creation.

That is what this psalm is about. It is about remembering that God has a plan to restore the world and that that God was going to enact that plan through this people and that they were therefore like children of God - the proof of that is the inheritance and the mighty acts of God that prepared the way.

Centuries after this poem was written Jesus' disciples finally came to realize what Jesus was teaching them – that they too were chosen and that God's plan to restore the world was going forward and that God was moving in mighty ways to prepare the way of the LORD. This is Good News which is why the early church called it the gospel.

The song *All Things New* by Andrew Peterson sums it up nicely:

*The World was Good* [at creation]

*The World is fallen* [because of our sin, our failures to live in obedience]

*The World will be redeemed* [through the power of Christ and our adoption as heirs.]

This is and must be the angle we take as we seek God's vision for ABC. If we are part of God's plan to restore the World damaged at the fall, if God has chosen us for that task, then we need to live in obedience to see how he wants us to achieve his goals.

What does all this have to do with our themes today: worship, revival?

Just this:

True worship, genuine worship, is the byproduct of seeing who God is and what God has done. Or, as N.T. Wright put it, "When we begin to glimpse the Reality of God, the natural reaction is to worship him."

Like the disciples standing soaking wet in the boat, their jaws on the floor after Jesus calmed the storm, we are closest to worship when we see what God has done.

That is why so many psalms are set up like Psalm 135. They praise the Lord for He is good and then list all the things he did.

But that still leaves us with a question and a problem...

The question? How do we glimpse the reality of God? Which is just another way of asking, how do we get the right perspective? How do we see God's vision for the world if we have not yet witnessed his power for ourselves? How do we worship God when we are young fish, when, for whatever reason, we have not lived through, traveled through, witnessed God's glory?

And the problem is this: What if we have witnessed God power, but, like the disciples in the boat, we have no context to make sense of it? Who is the Man that even the wind and waves obey him? What if we are swimming through the water of God's blessing every day but we don't know it?

The answer, quite simply, is to do as the Hebrews did all the time with Psalm 135: listen and retell the stories of God's mighty acts in the past, so that we can anticipate them in the future. This is what the Israelites did at their festivals when they had their symbolic meals and read these poems and sang these songs about what God did for them in the past. It is all part of teaching the young fish how to swim. It's about reminding the whole community, lest they forget, what God did, reminding them to look at the world differently than the nations around them. Teaching them the signs so that when God acts in mighty ways in their lives they aren't left scratching their heads saying, "who is this man?"

We can do this right here at ABC by exploring the scriptures and telling the stories of God's greatness in it's pages. But there are also men and women in this congregation who are like the old fish. They have the perspective of those who have traveled far, lived long, learned much. Don't get to caught up the terms old and young. I am talking about people among us who have seen God at work and can testify to his power. We need to listen to those stories again and again and again until we start to see the same story arch in our own lives.

This is the challenge for us this week. Go and think about what God has done in your life. And if you can't come up with much then maybe, just maybe you don't have the right perspective. In that case, start to talk to people you think have seen glimpses of God at work. Listen to the stories. Learn the pattern. And soon you, too, will begin to see the reality of God and what he has done.

One last thought: when one person glimpses the reality of God and lets it take hold of them - that's conversion - and it can be very powerful. But when a whole community glimpses the goodness of God and the Holy Spirit takes hold of them all – that, that is revival. Let us go with our eyes open, prepared to see what God is planning to do.

### **Benediction**

Go now in the grace and peace of our lord Jesus Christ – He lived and died and rose again to fulfill God's plan to restore the world. Now we are invited to join the mission. Go and become part of the story. Amen.