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Westmoreland Congregational United Church of Christ
Bethesda, Maryland

Sunday, December 25, 2016
Christmas Day
10:00 AM

“The Paradox of Power”

Psalm 97

*God is our Sovereign! Let the earth rejoice!
Let the many coastlands be glad!
Clouds and thick darkness are all around God.
Righteousness and justice are the foundation of God’s throne.
Fire goes before the Holy One,
and consumes God’s adversaries on every side.
God’s lightning lights up the world;
the earth sees and trembles.
The mountains melt like wax before our God,
before the Holy One of all the earth.
The heavens proclaim God’s righteousness;
and all the peoples behold God’s glory.
All worshipers of images are put to shame,
those who make their boast in worthless idols;
all gods bow down before God.
The city hears and is glad,
and the towns of the nation rejoice,
because of your judgments, O God.
For you, Holy One, are most high over all the earth;
you are exalted far above all gods.
Our God loves those who hate evil;
God guards the lives of the faithful;
God rescues them from the hand of the wicked.
Light dawns for the righteous,
and joy for the upright in heart.
Rejoice in our God, O you righteous,
and give thanks to God’s holy name!*

This morning, maybe even before most of us stumbled in our pajamas to the Christmas tree, monks in monasteries all around the world chanted the words from Psalm 97, the words we used to begin. That psalm is assigned for Christmas on most of

the church's lectionaries. "God is the Sovereign," the psalm begins. The King James Version of the Bible begins this psalm with the phrase, "The Lord reigneth."

James Howell is a Methodist pastor in North Carolina. He has written about this psalm as part of the Christmas story. And he points out that on that first Christmas morning, "It was the mighty Caesar who reigned. The angels may not have sung loudly enough for the echoes to reach his palace in Rome." And while the shepherds may have left the field rejoicing about peace on earth, they forgot to tell the powers that be that a new kind of ruler had been born in a manger.

"Let the earth rejoice," the psalm says. But the earth seems not to care so much, really.

Think about it... For the original Jewish writer of this psalm to sit in an out-of-the-way corner of the world and say, "Our God is the Ruler of the Universe."

"Why this foolishness," James Howell asks. "Was it lunacy? Or a profound faith that could stand boldly in the face of being small, puny, a laughingstock, and still affirm that 'Our [God] is [Sovereign]!'—and yours isn't"?

For the psalmist, this affirmation was a direct affront to the superpowers of the day who worshipped other gods. And to see this as part of the first Christmas story is to challenge Rome. To say that Jesus is Lord means that Caesar is not. And there are so many Gods—money, consumerism, power, war, greed.

And Jesus doesn't look like any of that so much. Again, James Howell, who has pointed out that, "Jesus lay in a manger instead of a palace. Instead of issuing edicts, Jesus simply let out a cry only his mother could hear. [As an adult,] Jesus surrounded

himself with poor clueless fishermen instead of power brokers. Jesus recruited a cadre of grateful lepers instead of an army of well-drilled soldiers. Jesus rode a wobbly donkey instead of a sprightly stallion. And you know the story says that Jesus assumed a cross with a crown of thorns, not a throne with a crown of gold.”

What a strange story we celebrate this morning. How odd is this reign of God? So odd that maybe all we can do is laugh. “Laugh out loud,” James Howell says, “when the magi tell King Herod, “We have come to worship the king”—and they mean a baby in a barn not the guy sitting in the palace. Laugh when Pontius Pilate snidely asks Jesus, “Are you a king?” He commands no earthly regiments, he calls down no heavenly power to defend himself, he says not a single word. In his entourage were not senators and oligarchs, but lepers, prostitutes, the unlettered, the nobodies...”

“Let earth receive her king,” the carol says. What kind of king is this? With what kind of power?

Power is a strange thing in America these days. A strange thing here in our nation’s capital for sure. And a strange thing this Christmas morning, when we remember that the “power of God...is...a small, paradoxical power.” The power of God is “the power of humble service.”

Power is not found in the Trump Hotel or the White House or the Capitol. Maybe not even around our Christmas trees. And maybe not even in the red brick, white columned pretty church that sits on a green circle.

“Do you want to see power?” James Howell asks in his writing. “Watch Jesus touch the untouchables, or wash the feet of those who would gladly have washed his. Watch Jesus surrender his very life... Watch Jesus forgive the very people who just spat on him...”

“God is our Sovereign! Let the earth rejoice.”

“The world still mockingly laughs at this assertion, James Howell says—or yawns in boredom.”

Even so we sing with the psalmist this strange carol: “God is our Sovereign! Let the earth rejoice!”

We sing with the hymn writer, “Good Christian friends, Christ is born today!”

We sing with wonder—and even with laughter—because the world is not really as it seems.

Power is not found on thrones or in the halls of government. Power is not found in what one can purchase or who one can kill.

Power—the power of God—is found in out-of-the-way mangers. The power of God is found in love and sacrifice. The power of God is found in welcoming strangers and seeking justice.

That is the promise of Christmas. That is the gift we unwrap again. Christ is born today. Merry, merry Christmas.