

The Sermon for LWML Sunday

Psalm 121 Isaiah 52:7-10

October 4, 2009

Today we celebrate Lutheran Women's Missionary League Sunday using the theme from their convention earlier this year in Portland, Oregon:

Look to the Hills...God Reigns!

This theme is based on two Bible passages:

Psalm 121:1-2 (ESV) I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come? My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth.

And:

Isaiah 52:7 (ESV) How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness, who publishes salvation, who says to Zion, "Your God reigns."

From these two passages, the organizers of the LWML convention came up with the phrase:

Look to the Hills...God Reigns!

What a marvelous message we receive from God's messenger on the mountain: "*God Reigns.*"

Does the majestic word "REIGN" come up in your day-to-day conversation very much? Not really ... We don't live under a monarchy and so the use of the word "*reign*" has declined in our daily speech.

Reign is the authority that kings, queens, and other royal people have by virtue of their office as rulers. Reign speaks of being led. Reign means someone else is in charge. So when we say that God reigns, it is just a way of saying that God is in control. But what does it mean that God is in control? What is special or unique about the fact that "God Reigns?"

If we could talk to the original audience of Isaiah's words, we might hear a lot of frustration with the phrase "God reigns." The faithful remnant of God's people was in Babylon. That remnant had watched the Babylonian army destroy Jerusalem and even the beloved temple. Then the Babylonians drove the remnant into exile – into service to the Babylonians in Babylon. The members of the remnant were prisoners in Babylon. These Exiles were trapped in virtually the hottest and flattest city in the Middle East. Can you imagine anyone more homesick for the hills and mountains of their homeland than these poor exiles? From their point of view, it sure looked like Babylon reigned, not God.

Do you ever get that helpless feeling? There is so much that happens around us - there are other powers which look much greater and more powerful than we do as the church of Christ. Christians are in the minority. Christians seem to be losing influence. Christians are ridiculed. In the Pacific Northwest where the LWML convention was held, participants learned that the largest denomination in the area was “None of the above.” Whether God’s faithful remnant was in exile in Babylon or whether it is in the United States, it is small. Those who have a religious preference of “NONE” outnumber the faithful. There are many powerful, false gods, of our time and our society: pleasure, entertainment, popularity, fame, wealth, power, and so forth. Sometimes people gather together to worship these things in large buildings, but those buildings or stadiums or malls are not churches. The people in our land are just as captive to sin as people have been since man fell in Eden. People need to hear the Good News.

The theme of the LWML convention asks us to look to the hills, but which hills? Which hills are “the hills?”

Anyone who has been in hills or mountains can certainly agree with David: ^[Psalm 19:1] “*The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.*” The beauty of nature has much to teach us about the God who reigns. We see the glory of His creation. The beauty of nature proclaims the existence of some sort of supreme power.

The problem is that there is another declaration in nature. Mountains have storms. People freeze in blizzards, get caught in land slides. Fires ravage the landscape. Earth quakes spread destruction. In flatter areas tornadoes, hail, lightning, and other forces of nature bring death and catastrophe. Tsunami’s kill millions at the ocean shore. Hurricanes drive many from their homes. Diseases and pests take their toll. Although nature can be very beautiful, it can also be very destructive and deadly.

Looking at the hills of nature tells us two things:

1. There is a god or force or principal or something that is in charge of this world in which we live and gives us all its beauty.
2. This something must not be happy with us for why else would all these disasters come upon us.

This explains why all the false religions of this world are obsessed with appeasing this god in some way. Every culture has come up with a way to please this god or force or karma or whatever. These things might be good deeds, meditating on mysteries, paying money, going on a quest, or any other combinations of charms, spells, works, meditations, and so forth. The idea is that we have to do something to keep the gods happy or distracted or at least off of our back.

Then a time came when the true God came to His people on a mountain and told them exactly what they had to do to please Him and the situation was much worse than we thought. Ten times, God thundered out, “Thou shalt not ...” Ten times His people heard the terrible commands that were impossible to keep. The revelation of the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai was so terrible that the people had one reaction. ^[Exodus 20:18-19] *When all the people saw the thunder and the flashes of lightning and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking, the people were afraid and trembled, and they stood far off and said to Moses, “You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die.”* Mount Sinai showed us that God reigns all right, but it is far from comforting. In fact, if we looked to the hill of Sinai for our salvation, we could only live in despair.

From Sinai we learn that we are responsible for all the disasters that befall us. All the wars, diseases, storms, injuries, and other disasters are here on this earth because we brought them here with our sin. It is our own evil that makes this world evil. This hill of Sinai is just as terrifying for us as it was for the people back in the days of Moses.

But there is another hill where God reigns. This hill is entirely different than the hill of nature or the hill of Sinai. This hill does not tell us that we must do something to appease the creator of this world. This hill tells us that there is a man who has already appeased the creator. This hill tells us that this one man is not just a man, but He is also the God who reigns. This hill tells us that this man is our God and our God reigns.

Our God does not reign as the rulers of this world reign. Instead, He rules from apparent weakness. He set aside His power and glory and took on our humanity. In His humanity He took up our sin, the sin that cursed this world. He took that sin through suffering and death, through blood and tears. He allowed mere mortal men to torture Him with rods and whips and thorns. He allowed mere mortal men to nail Him to a cross on a hill far away – on a hill near Jerusalem – on a hill named Golgotha. There our God reigned by dying a human death.

As we look to that hill, we see a dead man hanging from a cross. It doesn’t look at all like God reigns when we look at that cross – not by earthly standards anyway. Yet, it is on that cross that ^[Matthew 27:46] *Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”* and ^[John 19:30] *“It is finished.”* Jesus experienced the forsakenness of God the Father in our place. He experienced that forsakenness until He finished paying the penalty for our sin. Then He died. That is how our God reigns – with His suffering and death – with thorns for a crown and a cross for a throne.

Jesus decided to reign in love and sacrifice and not with might and power. Soldiers mocked Jesus by placing a purple robe on His shoulders and a crown on His head. Jesus, mocked in purple, crowned with thorns, reigns! Jesus, mocked in purple and crowned with thorns, gave Himself so that each of us can reign in eternity as sons and daughters of the King!

Isaiah 52:7 says it with joy to captives and homesick people: *“How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, “Your God Reigns.”*”

Whose fleet and beautiful feet bring this message? Who brings good news? Who proclaims peace? Who brings good tidings? Who proclaims salvation? Who says, “God Reigns!”? It’s Jesus! How does Jesus bring good news, proclaim peace, bring good tidings, and proclaim salvation?

When Jesus Christ rose from the dead, he reigned! He reigned over death, and sin, and became our champion. Ever since, we’ve been going to the ends of the earth, baptizing and making disciples.

The LWML has followed the leading of the Holy Spirit to help proclaim the saving message of the one with beautiful nail-pierced feet who washes away the sin of the whole world. With Word and Sacrament, with preaching and baptizing, believers proclaim His unconditional love by word and deed.

All this from a Savior in a purple robe, a crown of thorns, seven words from the cross, and an empty tomb. Our god reigns in suffering, in death, and in life forever more. Our God reigns. Amen