

# IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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The Reverend Courtney Veazey  
Sunday, July 2, 2023

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## Psalm 97

The LORD is king! Let the earth rejoice;  
let the many coastlands be glad!  
Clouds and thick darkness are all around him;  
righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne.  
Fire goes before him  
and consumes his adversaries on every side.  
His lightnings light up the world;  
the earth sees and trembles.  
The mountains melt like wax before the LORD,  
before the Lord of all the earth.  
The heavens proclaim his righteousness,  
and all the peoples behold his glory.  
All servants of images are put to shame,  
those who make their boast in worthless idols;  
all gods bow down before him.  
Zion hears and is glad,  
and the towns of Judah rejoice  
because of your judgments, O God.  
For you, O LORD, are most high over all the earth;  
you are exalted far above all gods.  
You who love the LORD, hate evil;  
he guards the lives of his faithful;  
he rescues them from the hand of the wicked.  
Light dawns for the righteous  
and joy for the upright in heart.  
Rejoice in the LORD, O you righteous,  
and give thanks to his holy name!

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Holy wisdom, holy word. **Thanks be to God.**

Finally comes the poet – offering us images of clouds and thick darkness, consuming fire and lightning, trembling earth and melting mountains.

Finally comes the poet – offering us images of truth about our Lord’s sovereignty and royal reign, images that counteract worthless idols in whom we are tempted to boast. Finally comes the poet.

The book of Psalms is a liturgical collection of poetic prayer. It is a library of poetic prayers whose use in worship shaped the Israelites’ understanding of God – and whose ancient words now shape *our* understanding.

Psalm 97 comes to us from a people who knew the trauma of exile – the trauma of being forcibly relocated to Babylonia after that world power conquered Judah and destroyed Jerusalem’s Temple, their place of worship.

Our faith ancestors who sang this poetic prayer also embodied the burden of returning from exile, of returning to a land that is familiar but not the same, of re-constructing the Temple, of engaging the difficult work of transformation, and of wrestling with the identity of their community.

Our faith ancestors who birthed and breathed this poetic prayer also knew what it meant to live in a society fractured by a multiplicity of gods. Ancient Israelites resided in a culture of henotheism. In Gail Ramshaw’s biblical commentary on Psalm 97, she writes that “according to henotheism, all nations and lands have their own gods. In henotheistic understanding, our god is better than all those other gods, and in our area of the world, only our god is to be honored.”

This henotheistic understanding appears in verse 7 when the psalmist claims that “all gods bow down before the Lord.”

While Christianity is a monotheistic faith – a faith that claims our triune God is the only god that exists – the ancient concept of henotheism rings true for me even today. Who or what are the pseudo-gods, the worthless idols, the ungoods in our lives? What images do we serve that ultimately put us to shame? What forces in our world claim to be king?

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I can name a few kings that parade before us.

Kings of greed and violence.

Kings of “otherism” and patriarchy.

Kings of nationalism and xenophobia.

Kings of comfort, advantage, and status.

Kings of scarcity and fear.

Kings of prideful certainty.

The conservative king. The liberal king. The Democratic king. The Republican king.

Finally comes the poet’s powerful protest. The Lord – the “I AM WHO I AM” – is King! The Lord whose throne is grounded in – fixed in – righteousness and justice is King! Let our despairing hearts rejoice! For the Lord is exalted far above all gods.

Our poetic prayer this morning invites us to wonder about the power of poetry and poetry’s unique ability to speak truth to power through imagery’s subtle resistance. Its ability to creatively push back against our world’s false kings and false gods. Poetry’s power of protest is often dismissed.

The poet and community organizer Aja Monet describes this dismissal in her beautiful and haunting spoken-word album *when the poems do what they do*. She speaks: “When I first showed up to the community organizing meeting I uttered the word ‘poetry.’ And their faces sunk with confusion. ‘Who’s got time for poems, when the world’s on fire?’” How shall we respond to a world on fire that threatens to silence voices speaking against injustice?

“You who love the Lord, hate evil,” our psalmist writes. Hating evil requires us to speak against that evil. To use our poetic voices and prayers to confess that the Lord reigns in every aspect of our lives –

in our society and culture –

in our economics and politics –

in our science and technology –

in our individual and corporate beings.

Light dawns and joy arises every time we confess the truth of our Lord’s sovereignty. And when faces sink with confusion at our confession, finally comes the poet, reminding us that the Lord continually keeps watch over the souls of those devoted to proclaiming this truth – that the Lord rescues us from the clenching grasp of all that is evil and wicked. In the Lord’s hands, we are free to protest evil and to protest all that threatens to separate our souls from the one true King.

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When the community that we call the Church came to be, Christ's followers lived within oppressive governmental structures and deeply unjust rule. As they reflected upon Jesus' identity and purpose, they turned to the poetic prayers that we identify as the royal – or enthronement – Psalms. Identifying Christ as the one who reigns freed the church to resist all that pushed against who they knew themselves to be as a people living within God's kingdom.

Christ is Lord, and the Lord is king! Rejoice in the Lord, all your righteous, and give thanks to the Lord's holy name!

This final line of Psalm 97 commands us to rejoice in the truth of who truly reigns in this world. It also commands us to give thanks.

While our English translation implores us to give thanks to the Lord's holy name, the original Hebrew points our thanks in a different direction. It commands us to give thanks to the Lord's holy *zekher* – holy *memory*. Give thanks to the memory of our Lord's character and works.

When we come together for the sacrament of communion in a few moments, we do just that. We give thanks to our triune God's holy memory. In our Great Prayer of Thanksgiving before we partake in the feast, we remember our triune God's character and works across generations. We protest the world's false kings and remember the God of gods and Lord of lords – we remember our true King.

The King who makes heaven and earth –  
who forms us from the dust and breathes life into our nostrils –  
who delivers us from Pharaoh and makes our dry bones dance –  
who is our light when we sit in darkness –  
who becomes flesh to live among us –  
who breaks down our dividing wall –  
who baptizes us and sends us to love the stranger.

Who's got time for poems and feasts when the world's on fire?

We do.

The Lord reigns – yesterday, today, and tomorrow.

Come, fellow poets – rejoice – and remember the One whose lightnings light up the world.