

Sermon Series:

The Psalms

THE LORD REIGNS – Psalm 93; Revelation 4,5

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The World's Anxiety

On Tuesday this past week, I was scrolling through the ABC News app on my phone and came across an article entitled, Mad World: Global flashpoints to watch in 2023.¹ Not exactly a reassuring title! It went on to review all the problems of the past year and what the analyst thought might go wrong in 2023. The list was sobering. The article also introduced the term 'polycrisis'. 'Polycrisis' is when there are multiple, interrelated crises affecting people. The word 'poly' means 'multiple' as in 'polygamy' which means 'many wives'. For example, we experienced a polycrisis this year in the fresh produce supply. The fires and floods of the past couple of years destroyed fruit trees and crops and prevented or delayed fresh plantings. This was a series of natural disasters that covered a wide area of the country. Then, the farmers who still had crops, didn't have the labour needed to harvest it. This was because the foreign workers they depend on weren't able to come into the country due to the pandemic. Then, because of the war in the Ukraine and other disturbances around the world, there was a shortage in the fuel supply which pushed up the price of transporting the fresh produce to market. We were shown pictures of farms with empty fields or rotting fruit and vegetables and supermarkets with scarcely populated shelves and high prices. One of these crises would have caused some disruption, but things would have quickly recovered. A combination of all of them and we are still not back to what we knew as 'normal'. This is not an unusual situation around the world and in many places, the resultant problems are life-threatening.

'Polycrisis' is a new word which attempts to describe how multiple crises interact with each other to make things worse. But there is another word which has been invented in the past couple of years which is even more concerning. The word is 'permacrisis'. It was chosen as the Collins Dictionary "Word of the Year" for 2022 because they thought it "sums up quite

¹ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-01-10/ukraine-iran-famine-global-flashpoints-in-2023-polycrisi/101838500>

succinctly how truly awful 2022 has been for so many people”.² It describes “an extended period of instability and insecurity resulting from a series of catastrophic events”. ‘Permacrisis’ is a constant, or permanent state of crisis – it is what happens when the crises come one after another, interacting with each other, and building upon each other so that we end up in a situation where ‘normal’ no longer seems to exist. We can no longer see a light at the end of the tunnel, and we just try to manage things as best we can with no real hope that things are going to get better. Here in Australia, it might not feel that bad, although some people who have been flooded multiple times this year might think it has been that bad. And sometimes, polycrisis or permacrisis happens, not on a national or global level, but on a personal level when health struggles, family difficulties, work issues and financial uncertainties build up and become overwhelming.

So how do people respond to this reality? I think most people respond in one of two basic ways. We seek to preserve and protect ourselves in crisis by either running away from problems or trying to attack the perceived source of the problems - flight or fight.

Those who run away, seek to isolate themselves from the problems around them. An example of this would be monks who live in a cloistered society where they shut themselves away in their monastery and have little or no contact with the outside world. Older people like us, when faced with the complexities of the present, are often tempted to run away by focusing on the past and how much better things were then. Even some churches do this, refusing to interact with the world around them and becoming a closed little club of people living in the past. The problem with running away is that you become irrelevant to life today and have nothing to offer those who are suffering. Running away is often a self-centred response that cares nothing for others.

On the other hand, those who respond by attacking are not helpful either. These people look for someone to blame for their pain and pour out all their hurt and frustration against those they perceive as being the source of the problem. During the pandemic, those trying to set and enforce restrictions faced vilification and death-threats – yes, even here in Australia. I’m not saying that they did everything right, and I hope we can learn and be better prepared for similar situations in the future. However, blame and anger just adds to the problem and often makes things worse. Those with this response are drawn to strong, aggressive leaders whom they think will fight for them. The last couple of times I was in the USA, the last time just days before Trump was elected, I was deeply saddened by what I saw there. Many people were suffering from insufficient pay for long hours of work, poor healthcare, racial tensions, failing school systems – the list could go on. They had lost hope. It really is no wonder that people turned to the strong leader they felt they had in Trump. Around the world, more and more governments are being run by strong, aggressive, authoritarian leaders because people are looking for ways to fight back. The problem is that such leaders always disappoint. Always. They may do some good to begin with, but eventually power corrupts and many times they turn on the very people who supported them. Attacking just escalates the problems and adds to the crises.

² <https://theconversation.com/permacrisis-what-it-means-and-why-its-word-of-the-year-for-2022-194306>

So where does that leave us? Is there any hope? Any way to move forward? Yes! And to find this, let's turn to Psalm 93.

God's Rule

Psalm 93 starts with three words which change everything for me and offer hope.

The Lord reigns!

Some translations make this a separate sentence with an exclamation mark at the end – I like that! These three words lift our eyes from the world around us and remind us of the existence of the LORD – the great King of kings and Lord of lords. The one who rules over the world in which we live. We are reminded that there is a reality beyond what we can see right in front of ourselves. And with this, comes a reason for hope.

1. Basis

The Psalmist then spends the rest of the Psalm describing our God and His rule. First, we learn the basis of God's rule in who He is and what He has done.

He is clothed with majesty;

The LORD has clothed and encircled Himself with strength.

God is pictured as wearing His royal robes and armour. I don't know if you've ever seen pictures of ancient kings going out to battle, but some had gold overlay on their breastplates and helmets and wore red robes that flew out behind them as they charged on their horse. Jewels encrusted their swords and harnesses. When the sun was shining, they were dazzling – like a god. The sight was designed to strike awe and fear into the hearts of the enemy. For these kings, it was all a show because they were, after all, not gods but just men like everyone else. A well-placed arrow could kill them too. But with God, He is clothed with real majesty and strength, not just fancy clothes.

Of course, the question about any king – or queen is what have they done to give them the right to rule. But with God, there can be no question of this. He is the king because the earth is His creation.

Indeed, the world is firmly established; it will not be moved.

Your throne is established from of old;

You are from eternity.

God has existed from all eternity past – He has always been. But then He decided to create the world and sustain it. By His strength He holds our world together and watches over it; it is firmly established. And He has established His throne or His rule over it. Although He chooses to allow sin to affect His creation for a time, He has never given over control of His world. Although we experience crises which feel like they are tearing apart our world, God will not allow the world to be moved or destroyed. Because God is who He is, we can trust about His reign and know that nothing can shake it.

2. Challenge

In the ancient world that this Psalm comes from, the part of nature which seemed most beyond the control of humanity was the sea. As such it was often used as a picture for upheaval and chaos. And that is how it is used here.

The floods (seas) have lifted up, O LORD,

This is a picture of trouble rising up to challenge God's rule. Something happens which causes us to wonder if God is really in control; if there something which is stronger than God. As we see things seeming to go from bad to worse, we can wonder if He is in control of things, can't we? But then the Psalmist goes on ...

*The floods have lifted up their voice,
The floods lift up their pounding waves.
However, more than the sounds of many waters,
Than the mighty breakers of the sea, ...*

The waves of the sea are pounding and roaring – it is frankly terrifying. HOWEVER, more than the worst that the seas can do ...

The LORD on high is mighty.

Nothing – nothing that the seas, that nature, that sin can do - nothing can threaten God's rule over His world. No matter what happens, God is still on the throne, and He is still in control. Just as God set the boundaries of the physical oceans and keeps them in place, so He has set the boundaries of the trouble in this world, and He keeps it within the boundaries He has set. Sometimes we need reminding of this when we are feeling anxious. I remember that when I would start to worry about something, my mother would quietly say, "Is God still on the throne?" What could I answer to that but, "Yes!". So why was I worrying?

3. Character

It is wonderful to remember God's awesome power and unshakeable rule. But, as we said before, human beings who gain power are always corrupted by that power. This leads to the question, "Can God be trusted to wield His power for the good of His creation, for the good of me?" And I think this question is why we still worry even though we would affirm that God reigns over His world.

The final verse addresses this concern.

*Your testimonies are fully confirmed
(OR your decrees are stable and sure)
Holiness is pleasing to your house, LORD, forevermore.*

As the LORD reigns over this world, He tells us how to live in His world in holiness and truth; how to walk in the way He has ordained for humanity to live. These are His decrees, and we can depend on them because they are stable and sure – even in the midst of a changing and sometimes chaotic world. And these decrees come out of His holiness, His righteousness and goodness. His house – His throne or palace – is established

forevermore in holiness. He will never be corrupted by power and His desire for us is always good. We can trust that His goodness will never, ever change.

Our Response

The ABC News article I talked about at the beginning, ended with the following analysis:

World leaders are dealing with a host of pressing issues:

- the changes in climate
- the socio-economic repercussions of the COVID pandemic, by no means over
- 100 million displaced people
- the increasing global population, now over 8 billion
- the rising cost of living

All this means 2023 is likely to be another turbulent year.

It doesn't look like "permacrisis" is going away anytime soon. And this doesn't even take into account our own personal crises which can upend our world.

So how should we, as Christians, respond to the permacrisis reality? I'd like to suggest that we don't all join monasteries or spend all our time thinking about the past and wishing we could turn back the clock. Nor do I think we should band together and fight against anyone we blame for the difficulties we face. No, I think that, in light of God's reign over this world, we have a third option.

Firstly, because we know that God is in control, we can choose to actively and deliberately put our trust in our God who reigns. I'll admit this isn't always easy! Sometimes I need someone to stop me in my tracks and ask me, "Is God still on the throne?" I need to be reminded that I can trust Him with my life and lives of those I love. I can trust Him unreservedly.

And secondly from that position of security and faith in God's reign, I can reach out to those around me in loving service. Our world is hurting badly. Your neighbours are hurting badly. Your family and friends are feeling the stress of poly- or permacrisis. A kind word, a helping hand, a calm presence can make all the difference to them. And we have a hope to offer them – the possibility of a relationship with the God who reigns. Let's share that hope freely.

Conclusion

As we conclude our look at God's rule, I'd like to take us into the throne room of God as it is described in Revelation 4 & 5. John, the author of Revelation describes the scene:

... behold, a throne was standing in heaven, and someone was sitting on the throne. And He who was sitting was like a jasper stone and a sardius in appearance; and there was a rainbow around the throne, like an emerald in appearance ... Out from the throne came flashes of lightning and sounds and peals of thunder. And there were seven lamps of fire burning before the throne, which are the seven spirits of God; and before the throne there was something like a sea of glass, like crystal ... (Revelation 4: 2-6)

It is obvious that the scene is overwhelming to John, and he is struggling to find the words to describe what he is seeing. He goes on to describe 24 elders who are sitting on 24 thrones around the throne of God and 4 living creatures who serve Him there. As he watches, these bow down and worship God, saying:

“Worthy are You, our Lord and our God, to receive glory and honour and power; for You created all things, and because of Your will they existed, and were created.”
(4:11)

They are affirming God’s right to rule the world because He created the world and sustains it by His power.

Then John sees a scroll in which are written all of God’s plans and purposes for the world. But the question is raised as to who is worthy to open the scroll and read it and carry out God’s plans. John weeps because it seems that no one is worthy or able for such a task. But then he sees a Lamb who has been slaughtered. This represents Jesus, the one who was sacrificed for our sin and was raised to life again. When He steps forward to take the scroll, the 24 elders and 4 living creatures fall on their faces before Him and sing a new song of worship:

“Worthy are You to take the scroll and to break its seals; for You were slain, and You purchased people for God with Your blood from every tribe, language, people, and nation. You have made them into a kingdom and priests to our God, and they will reign upon the earth.” (5:9,10)

The Lamb of God, Jesus our Saviour, is worthy to carry out God’s plans and purposes. He has already successfully acted on God’s behalf by buying our salvation with His blood and bringing us into the kingdom of God, making us God’s people once again. He is able to do whatever is necessary to continue to bring God’s plans and purposes to their intended conclusion. We can trust Him. And it is interesting to notice that we will reign with Him – which is the role God gave Adam and Eve when He created them. We are not to run away from responsibility, not try to dominate and fight, but to serve and care for the world and its inhabitants like Jesus does, as we work under the reign of God.

This gives me hope, and purpose, and strength as we face yet another year of uncertainty. The ABC analyst might be right that 2023 will be another turbulent year. I am sure there are things which will happen in the world, and in our own lives, that will take us by surprise. But God is still on the throne. Amen!