



## Propelled by the Word

### Psalm 147

February 5, 2006

By the time you come to the end of this psalm, it's hard not to feel uplifted. It is a continuous stream of grateful praise to God, and if there is anything that can lift us up outside of our troubles, it is praise. This psalm is stream-of-consciousness praise: it jumps from one thanksgiving to another to another. It praises God for anything that comes to mind: for the city of Jerusalem, for healing the brokenhearted, for the stars in the sky, for lifting up the oppressed, for the rain that falls, and even for the glories of wintertime – it's all just one reason after another to praise God.

In the second half of the psalm, this stream of consciousness praising does come to focus upon one major theme, and that theme is the word of God. Last month we focused on the VOICE of God, blasting through a thunderstorm, waking up Samuel, shouting through God's authentic prophet. Now and through all of February, we will concentrate on the WORD of God, the ultimate theme of today's Psalm 147.

We're reading this psalm at just the right time of year, for it sings about the word of God coming through the cold of winter. Listen again to verse 15 and following:

He sends out his command to the earth; his word runs swiftly.  
He gives snow like wool; he scatters frost like ashes.  
He hurls down hail like crumbs – who can stand before his cold? (127:15-17)

“His word runs swiftly:” the picture here is of a powerful army commander who sends his order down the ranks. His order has so much authority that it instantly races through the whole army, only in this case the army is the very forces of nature. Just a word from God, and the forces of weather jump into action to spray snow like wool, fling frost like ashes, hurl hail like crumbs, and send such cold that even running streams stand frozen at attention (a more picturesque way to translate the end of v. 17). The composer of this psalm is standing outside in the middle of a snowstorm and seeing all of nature confessing the glory of God and bowing to the word of God.

I remember a moment like that on a youth ski trip. I don't get to go as much as I used to, but I remember taking a group from Elizabeth City, NC to Seven Springs, Pennsylvania, and standing one night outside by myself as 43 inches of snow came down overnight. There I stood in the midst of a howling blizzard, standing in the presence of a force far greater than I, whispering quietly to myself “Glory!!”

The psalm continues on to verse 18, when the weather changes, and spring comes. In the springtime, the psalm composer sees the forces of the atmosphere obeying the word of God again. Listen again:

He sends out his word, and melts them;  
he makes his wind blow, and the waters flow.

The warm wind of God's Spirit comes in due time, and the snow melts, and the ice hears the order "at ease," and the waters begin to flow again. Even the weather is a theological statement. God created heaven and earth and wind and weather by God's word. And even now all creation remembers and recognizes that Voice.

Next the psalm-singer moves from the word of God for creation, to the word of God for humanity:

He declares his word to Jacob, his statutes and ordinances to Israel. (147:19)

Just as the Creator God sends God's words of command to the forces of nature, so Almighty God sends words of command to God's people, to you and me. How extraordinary it is to receive the word of God. The word of God rules the forces of nature, and the word of God rules the hearts of humanity. One scholar was moved to say, "The power that has strewn the stars into their courses is the same power that 'heals the brokenhearted,' 'lifts the downtrodden,' and declares an intelligible, personal, life-giving word to Israel. (*J. Clinton McCann, New Interpreter's Bible, Commentary on the Psalms, p. 1269*)

In the winter storm we see how responsive wind and cold and snow are to the word of God. But the question comes, when God sends out his command to the people, will the word travel swiftly among them? Are we as responsive to the word of God as the very forces of the earth?

I pose to you this thought: the Word that drives even the weather drives us. The Word of God is a powerful thing, powerful enough to create all that is. When that Word starts moving, everything in its path starts moving. So if you let yourself get anywhere near the Word of God, it might just carry you away. The Word of God can get hold of you and hurl you like hail in the winter. The Word of God can make you stand at attention like a frozen waterfall. The Word of God can set you free and get you moving again like thawing streams in the springtime. We are propelled by the Word.

The whole Bible is one story after another of people who were overtaken and propelled by the Word of God. That's what happened to the great prophets of the Word. Jeremiah didn't even want to be a prophet, but once the Word got hold of him, it wouldn't let him go. Once he cried out,

If I say, "I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name," there is in my heart as it were a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot." (Jeremiah 20:9)

Jeremiah was owned and propelled by the Word of God.

Jesus was propelled by the Word of God. As soon as he was baptized, the word of God came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased,” and the sound of that voice propelled him out of the waters and into ministry. In fact the text actually says, “And the Spirit immediately drove him out...” (Mark 1:12) The Word and the Spirit propelled him, just like in the psalm when God “makes his wind blow, and the (once frozen) waters flow...” (Psalm 147:18b)

From then on Jesus was driven by an urgency that never let up. He began his ministry in Capernaum, but he didn’t stay there long:

“Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do.” And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.  
(Mark 1:38-39)

Jesus couldn’t wait to go through Galilee. From the moment the Word came down on him at baptism, Jesus came out of the waters preaching and healing, for the Word propelled him. In fact, the Word of God had such a hold on Jesus and so propelled Jesus, that the Word WAS Jesus. So the gospel says in John: Jesus is the Word that became flesh and dwelt among us. (John 1:14) Jesus was so gripped by the Word, Jesus was so propelled by the Word, that Jesus was and is the Word.

And through Jesus, that Word has become the driving force in all who follow Him. The Word was the driving force in Paul, who once confessed “...woe to me if I do not proclaim the gospel!” (1 Corinthians 9:16) The Word was the driving force in Martin Luther, who also put his own life on the line when he cried out, “My soul is captive to the Word of God. Here I stand. God help me, I can do no other.” I believe the Word is the driving force behind Roger Bullard going to India this week to teach scholars there how to translate the Word into their own dialect. I believe the Word was the driving force behind these men and women who went to Gulfport to be the presence of Christ the Word to that suffering community.

A couple of generations ago, the Word was the driving force in Dietrich Bonhoeffer. This month marks the hundredth birthday of Bonhoeffer, who was a pastor and teacher and writer in Nazi Germany. This Monday night PBS will broadcast a documentary of his life. Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s whole life was gripped and propelled by the Word of God. So when the words of Hitler spread across his homeland like wildfire, Bonhoeffer was one of the few pastors who had the courage to speak for another Word. The young theologian was given a chance to escape, an appointment to teach at Union Seminary in New York. But no sooner had he arrived in Manhattan than he felt he had made a great mistake. If the Word made flesh could promise “Lo, I am with you always,” could not Dietrich at least stay with his own people? He went back to live by that Word in Germany. In the spring of 1945, when the warm winds began to blow away

the cold of winter and set the frozen streams free to flow again, Bonhoeffer was hanged in a German prison camp. It was Bonhoeffer himself who once wrote, "When Jesus bids a man 'Follow me,' he bids him come and die." Dietrich Bonhoeffer was propelled by the Word.

A long time ago, an ancient Israelite stood in the midst of a snowstorm and sang to himself:

He sends out his command to the earth;  
his word runs swiftly.

May the Word of God run swiftly in you and me. May its dynamic power grab us and claim us. May the Word lift us up and carry us along its way.

- Douglas E. Murray