

***The Wrapper***  
Psalm 89.1-4, 19-26  
Sermon by Dan Schrock  
December 21, 2008  
Advent 4

*A Maskil of Ethan the Ezrahite.*

<sup>1</sup>*I will sing of your steadfast love, O LORD, forever;  
with my mouth I will proclaim your faithfulness to all generations.*

<sup>2</sup>*I declare that your steadfast love is established for ever;  
your faithfulness is as firm as the heavens.*

<sup>3</sup>*You said, "I have made a covenant with my chosen one,  
I have sworn to my servant David:*

<sup>4</sup>*I will establish your descendants forever,  
and build your throne for all generations."*

<sup>19</sup>*Then you spoke in a vision to your faithful one, and said:  
"I have set the crown on one who is mighty,  
I have exalted one chosen from the people.*

<sup>20</sup>*I have found my servant David;  
with my holy oil I have anointed him;*

<sup>21</sup>*my hand shall always remain with him;  
my arm also shall strengthen him.*

<sup>22</sup>*The enemy shall not outwit him,  
the wicked shall not humble him.*

<sup>23</sup>*I will crush his foes before him  
and strike down those who hate him.*

<sup>24</sup>*My faithfulness and steadfast love shall be with him;  
and in my name his horn shall be exalted.*

<sup>25</sup>*I will set his hand on the sea  
and his right hand on the rivers.*

<sup>26</sup>*He shall cry to me, 'You are my Father,  
my God, and the Rock of my salvation!'* (NRSV)

When I was a child, one of the things I struggled to understand was how I could connect with God when I could not see God. I could see and hear my parents; I could sit on their lap; I could taste the food my mother cooked for me; and I could smell the manure on my father's clothes when he came in the house after milking his cows each morning and evening. I could see, hear, touch, taste, and smell my parents and everything else in the world—but not God. God, I quickly learned, I could neither see nor hear, touch nor taste nor smell. God was invisible, distant, and mysterious. I had no problem at all believing that God existed; instead, the problem was figuring out how God and I could connect with each other. In what ways does God come to us?

People in the Old Testament also wrestled with this issue of how God comes to us. Very early on, Israel figured out that God sometimes comes to us directly, without any mediation. The technical word for this is *theophany*, which is an appearance of God to us that is unmediated by anyone or anything else. For example, it was a theophany when God appeared to Moses at the burning bush (Ex. 3). And it was a theophany when God appeared to Israel at Mt. Sinai shortly after the escape from Egypt (Ex. 19). Theophanies still happen, sometimes; but they are rare, and for many people today they may never happen at all.

People in the Old Testament quickly came to the same conclusion. As I said, they knew that theophanies do happen once in a while. But it didn't take long for writers of the Old Testament to conclude that theophanies are rare. Most of the time, God simply does not come to us directly.

So how does God usually come to us? The answer, said the theologians of Israel, is that God most often comes to us through some other medium. That is, God comes to us wrapped in something else. It's a little bit like a Christmas present. You rarely get your present directly, but more often you receive it wrapped in other things. For instance, if you get a pair of blue socks from your best friend, your friend doesn't usually just hand you the socks. Instead she wraps them up in some sort of Christmasy paper, perhaps with a bow tied around the outside. So when you receive this gift, you aren't even sure what it is. You first have to undo that bow, then you tear open the paper, and then probably, you also have to tear open another plastic or paper wrapping that the manufacturer placed around those socks at the factory. The gift comes to us mediated through ribbon, paper, and plastic.

So what are the wrappings in which the gifts of God come to us? In what ways is God mediated to us? Folks in ancient Israel come up with five answers to this question.

The first wrapping in which God comes to us, said Israel, is the law. We learn more about God, and we develop a deeper sense of God, through the medium of the law. The core of the law is the Ten Commandments given on Mt. Sinai, although in a more general way the law also includes numerous other statutes and stipulations in books like Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. If you want to connect with God, then follow the law, the *tôrâ*, because God comes to us wrapped in *tôrâ*, in written words. The Ten Commandments were written on stone tablets, and in time other laws were also written down on scrolls, clay tablets, or papyrus. Therefore this way of receiving the gift of God usually requires reading and study. Studying *tôrâ* is the wrapper you open to get to God.

The second wrapping in which God comes to us is the king. As you know, Israel's first three kings were Saul, David, and Solomon; and then after Solomon died the united kingdom of Israel was fractured into two separate nations, each of which then had a long sequence of kings, most of whom were less than satisfactory. You may also know that from the very first days of the monarchy, Israel was deeply conflicted about whether or not having kings was a good idea. Some Israelites believed that having kings was a huge mistake. Probably the most articulate expression of this view is found in 1 Samuel 8, where Samuel warns his fellow Israelites that kings are by nature militaristic, and that kings will impose heavy taxes both in order to support an army and also to support lavish palaces and lavish royal lifestyles (vv. 10-18).

Other people in Israel thought that having a king was a wonderful idea. Two primary passages in the Old Testament articulate a positive view of the monarchy. The first one is 2 Samuel 7, where David wants to build a house for God, which meant he wanted to build a temple in the capital city of Jerusalem. But God says no. Instead of accepting a house from David, God promises to build a house for David and David's descendants that will last forever (1-17). In 2 Samuel 7, God essentially makes an unconditional covenant with David, because no matter what David or his descendants do, God always love them steadfastly (15).

The other text that overwhelmingly approves of the monarchy is Psalm 89, parts of which we're using for today's worship service. In verse 4, God bluntly tells David: "I will establish your descendants forever, and build your throne for all generations." In verse 19, God talks about setting a "crown" on David, and exalting him "from the people." In verse 20, God speaks of finding and anointing David with holy coronation oil. Then in verses 21-25, God rolls out remarkable series of commitments, piling on the king promise after promise:

- My hand shall remain with David
- My arm shall strengthen David
- The enemy will not outwit David
- The wicked shall not humble David
- I will crush David's foes
- I will strike down those who hate David
- My faithfulness and steadfast love will be with David
- David's horn shall be exalted
- I will put David's hand on the sea and his right hand on the rivers.

This is an astonishing list. One gets the impression that David's life will be charmed, almost magical. In the final verse of our text, verse 26, God caps all this off by announcing that David will essentially become God's adopted son, and God will become David's adoptive father. Psalm 89, in other words, gives unqualified support to the monarchy. It argues that one of the major wrappings in which God comes to us is the Davidic kingship. Therefore this way of receiving the gift of God requires us to pay attention to the person and the actions of the king. Through their good and wise governance, kings mediate God to citizens of the kingdom. Well-ordered civic life is the wrapper that you open in order to get to God.

A third container in which God comes to us, said ancient Israel, is religious ceremony and ritual. For ancient Israel, worship mainly happened in the temple in Jerusalem. Worship involved bringing tithes and offerings, sacrificing animals, saying prayers and playing music. I don't know if you've ever thought about this, but worship in the Jerusalem temple was closely associated with the monarchy. The temple was built by Solomon, the richest king in Israel's history, and was located very close to the royal palace. Because the palace and temple were so near each other in the capital, the temple functioned as an expression of the king's political power. It symbolized a close relationship between king and worship. We can see this Psalm 89, which is a maskil, or an artful song, composed by Ethan the Ezrahite. 1 Chronicles 15 suggests that Ethan the Ezrahite was a temple musician, and if so, then we can guess Ethan composed Psalm 89 to be sung during temple worship services. What that means is that part of Israel's worship celebrated David and his royal descendants. There was therefore a close working relationship between king and priest, between politics and worship. Worship was another wrapper that you opened to get to God.

A fourth wrapper for God was the prophets. Generally speaking, the prophets were deeply critical of both the kingship and the temple. There are exceptions, of course, but people like Elijah and Elisha, Isaiah and Jeremiah, Joel and Amos, Micah and Hosea were appalled at how often Israel's kings—and Israel's worship—failed to be containers for God. Prophets frequently spoke out against kings for failing to pursue justice and peace, and in opposition to worship for failing to worship only Yahweh. Therefore by listening to the prophets, the people of Israel received the gift of God in a very different wrapper than the wrappers of king and temple, which all too often failed to be the kind of wrappers they were supposed to be.

The fifth wrapper for receiving God was the sage, the wise person. This is the purpose of books like Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. Through short but perceptive and pithy sayings, the sages of Israel tried to give people practical guidance for daily living. Pursue Wisdom, said the sages, and you will ultimately find God. Get Wisdom, and you will also get God. These five wrappings—Torah, king, temple, prophet, and sage—contained for ancient Israel the gift of God.

What people in those days did not know was that the day was coming when God would provide yet another wrapper—the wrapper of a child, born in the royal line of David, who would gather up into his own person all five of the old wrappers. Jesus, people would call him; and when fully grown into adulthood, this Jesus would become a new giver of Torah, a new king to rule the earth in justice and peace, a new temple worthy of artful worship, a new prophet to speak and act on behalf of the poor, and a new sage to teach us wisdom.

In a few days, the gift of God will come to you and me wrapped in Jesus. So when it comes to you, how would you like to open it?