

Today we begin a new four-week sermon series thinking about stewardship and worship involving one Psalm. The series is entitled, “To know God is to thank God.” The Psalm? Psalm 50. And this morning we’re going to read the entire psalm but first, as always, a little context. Grayson preached on divine encounters a few weeks ago. Today’s psalm is a theophany- a visible appearance of God to a person or people. You may notice in your bible that this psalm is titled *a psalm of Asaph*. According to 1 Chronicles (6:39; 16:7), Asaph, the author of this and a few other psalms, was a Levite temple musician assigned by David to provide music for worship. Asaph was also known as a prophet (1 Chronicles 25:1-8), which may be why he can deliver God’s word here in this psalm. Psalm 50 is neither prayer nor praise. Rather, for a large portion of this psalm (vv. 5, 7-22), God speaks, which makes this psalm a little different from most of the others. Psalm 50 was more than likely written for the Festival of Booths or Sukkot (“Sue-coat”). Why does this matter? It matters because in Exodus 21-23, God commanded the Israelites to keep three annual pilgrimage festivals- one in the spring called “Passover,” one in the early summer known as weeks or Pentecost, and one in the fall, Booths. And God asked that at each festival the Jewish heads of families were to make pilgrimage to Jerusalem in order to bring their first fruits- their offerings- no one was to come empty-handed. They did this in order to fulfill the law which is laid out several times in the Pentateuch, the Torah, the first five books of the Bible. For example, in Deuteronomy 16:13 the Israelites are told to “keep the festival of Booths for seven days...” And in Numbers 29, it outlines the tremendously large offering expected at the fall festival of

Booths from the people: 189 animals and more grain and produce. The point of telling you all of this? God commanded offerings be offered at these three festivals. It was the law. The Israelites knew the law and the drill, as it had become rote. What they didn't count on- perhaps- was the covenant renewal portion of the fall festival. We have to go back to Exodus (24:7-10) again to remember that the Israelites made a promise to be God's people and God promised to be their God, and they needed to be reminded of their commitment, as do we. In the covenant-making ceremony, the Israelites pledged to do God's will. But oh how soon they forgot what they had promised God and themselves. Some were faithful. Some were not. Psalm 50 recalls the covenant made at Sinai and in doing so reveals that Israel is in trouble. God speaks some important and harsh words here. God is appearing in judgment because they have not done what they said they would do. My OT Professor, the late Dr. Bruggemann, said it best. He denotes that Psalm 50 is nothing short of a courtroom drama, where God acts as the prosecutor and judge, addressing God's covenant people with many witnesses. In other words, God summons all the saints: all people for all time, past, present, and future from the rising sun to its setting- because this is a covenant lawsuit criticizing Israel for ritualism and the trivialization of God's holiness. God breaks His silence here so may we all pay careful attention to what God has to say. Before we do just that, let us pray. **PRAY. READ.**

I attended a wonderful Non-profit CEO retreat this past Thursday and Friday in Hendersonville, sponsored by Greater Good Greenville- thank you, Katy Smith, Catherine Puckett and the Hathaway Family

Foundation. Traci Newkirk led us in a powerful morning session involving “8 Questions Every Leader Should Ask.” For two of these questions, she had us phone not one but three friends, family members or co-workers and ask them, “How do you experience me as a _____ (spouse, mom, friend, co-worker)?” Then we had to close our mouths and listen. We followed up with a second question, “How can I improve?” Listening was not easy. We quickly thanked the people for the feedback and hung up, as we only had fifteen minutes total for this exercise. Hearing what was said was really transformative and hard. I can see though how some would want to run away and not hear what was said, but the rewards far outweighed the risks. This exercise was powerful, eye-opening, and very challenging. One colleague shared that her spouse was still texting her responses well after hanging up. We all realized that we don’t do this enough in our marriages or our relationships. How often are we offered the opportunity to self-reflect or to be aware of how we show up and then to take that information and make changes? In today’s psalm, because the people haven’t been so self-aware, God, whose love runs deep, is holding their feet to the fire, so to speak. He is having a what some of us call a come to Jesus or whomever you believe in meeting with them. Y’all know what I’m talking about. Yes, psalms like this make us cringe a little or a lot. These words are uncomfortable and convicting. I cringed a little when I heard feedback on how others experience me and how I could improve- mostly because I knew it was true. Yes, come and hear this amazing God but be ready because you most certainly won’t like what God has to say. It will make you cringe- even become defensive or angry or maybe even

completely shutdown. But I invite you not to do that! Stay present and open to God at work. Pay attention to why you cringe. Ask yourself and God what that's about in you. And then ask yourself what do you know to be true about God? The psalm gives us some clues as to who God is.

The first thing we notice is that God has entered the building, and His arrival is terrifying and awe-filled. Why does God think it was so important to have this over-the-top entrance for this festival? What's God's point? What are we to know about God from this? We also learn right away that the one who is about to address the people is mighty. And you cannot miss that God is being introduced as One who is extremely verbal. "God speaks, summons, does not keep silent, and calls. This is not a God who wishes to speak through others or remain distant. No. God brings news directly. God is God's own herald" (Shauna Hannan, WP). There are two other characteristics of this speaking God: 1. God comes out of the perfection of beauty in Zion. Zion is in Jerusalem where David established his city. It is where the God was believed to reside in the Ark of the covenant in the Temple and the second (2.) characteristic: God comes with some special effects: surrounded by devouring fire and encircled by a mighty tempest. Think about it. God's reputation and character make a big difference in how God is heard. Fear, awe, glory shining around- you name it! It was something to see and fear, and I cannot help but to think about the Wizard of Oz. "Not only do these characteristics speak of who God is, but the heavens chime in to put in their good word as well. One cannot find a more trustworthy witness. The one who is about to speak comes with stellar recommendations"

(Hannan). Therefore, listen! Pay attention to this divine encounter. Here we see that God is Creator of all, and God also always keeps God's word.

At the basic level of meaning- what does this text say? Can we name the obvious? "The psalm seems to reject everything commanded in the Jewish laws regarding sacrifices. God does not- contrary to what we've read in the Torah- desire to bring a bull, or a goat, or birds, any animal as an offering to God" (Jacobson). But what does this have to do with us today, Pastor? We don't bring animals here on Sundays to sacrifice to God. Let us not miss the intended point here. God isn't calling them out for bringing their sacrifices. Those were fine. God is calling them out for just reciting the words, going through the motions of bringing their sacrifices, and breaking their promises by not living in covenant relationship with God and one another. Improper worship will manifest in improper Christian living. This critique is timeless; we today can still engage in worship without a heartfelt connection to God, which results in spiritual emptiness. And that right there can be the gut punch. How many of us know people who talk the talk but don't walk the walk? You know, those people talk a good game about religion but they're mean, selfish, and miserable to be around. Or those people who actually distort religion to promote themselves while debasing and marginalizing others? How many of "those people" are staring back at us in the mirror? We self-sabotage, bow our heads in shame and tell ourselves that we aren't worthy. And you're right. We aren't. But God is and God makes us worthy and invites us to come to the Table of Grace. Don't run away! Instead, take a moment with me and push the insecurity and/or

self centered-ness to the side and let us open ourselves to take in God's love for us and for all of Creation. Because time and time again, and even in this very psalm, God offers us another chance to reflect on and change our ways and then to re-engage in authentic relationship with Him. Because the God I know is a God of mercy and love. Let us be reminded that the reason God is merciful is because his just judgment for sin was carried out on the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. Today while we give thanks to God for the lives of particular people of ages past, we also give glory to God for the ordinary, holy lives of believers who have gotten it right and wrong in this and every age. Yes, every time the church gathers in the present to celebrate the Lord's Supper, not only do we remember Christ's saving death, we also unite with the church of the past, anticipating that future reunion with the saints in heaven. At the beginning, middle, and end of the day, God is God and we are not. God is judge, and we are not. "It will take some figuring out to realize that this blazing fire burns only to purity, to free us from our little attempts to tame God" (Fred Gaiser, WP). Surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses in heaven and on earth, may we keep the faith, even as we doubt or tremble, and trust that God will hold us accountable and also give us grace we don't deserve. Therefore, let us continue to prayerfully reflect this month on what we can offer to God in true thanksgiving. I leave us with these questions to ponder. How does God experience you and how can you improve/repent/turn around? How do you participate in true worship? Who is God that you would want to give back? Amen.