



**VILLAGE
CHURCH**

Presbyterian (USA)

Mighty God

SCRIPTURE:
Psalm 96

Dec. 10, 2023 — Sermon by Rev. Dr. Rodger Nishioka

I love the Psalms. As part of my own daily devotions, I read a Psalm every morning. There are 150 Psalms. The book of Psalms is the hymnbook for the Hebrew people. The word “Psalms” comes from the Greek word “psalmos” meaning “to pluck.” Likely that refers to the musical instruments that would accompany the singer, such as the harp or the lyre. In the Hebrew Bible, this collection of songs is called the “tehilim,” the book of praises, a name I like much better.

The majority of the Psalms follow the same pattern. They start with a summons—a call to the people. “O sing to the Lord a new song!” You. Sing to the Lord, all the earth. Declare God’s glory.

Then, they tell you WHY. “For great is the Lord...” Because God made the heavens. Because honor and majesty are before God. Because strength and beauty are in God’s sanctuary. Summons. Why.

Then we are told what we DO. “Ascribe to the Lord, all families of the peoples. Ascribe to the Lord the glory due to God.” Bring an offering to God. Tremble before God. Because God will judge the world with righteousness and the peoples with God’s truth. This is the mighty God! And if you do not realize you are worshiping the mighty God, you are not paying attention.

One hundred years ago, an Austrian born and raised Jewish philosopher named Martin Buber wrote a book titled “Ich und Du,” translated in English, “I and thou.” In it, he said we humans exist in the world in two ways basically—two kinds of relationships.

The first is an “I-it” relationship. Most often with objects or things, we relate in an I-it way. We see “it” as something without a soul. We see

“it” as something for our use, to be consumed, for our pleasure, for our benefit. Again, most often these are things but later, as he experienced the Holocaust, Buber saw firsthand the evil of treating another person as an it. I-it. That’s one of two ways we exist in the world.

The other way we exist in the world is “I-thou.” Martin Buber says in an I-thou relationship, we view the other as a person who has a soul, who has agency.

Later philosophers took Buber’s brilliant work and named a third way human beings exist in the world. Not in an I-it relationship or an I-thou relationship but in an “I-I” relationship. In an I-I relationship, we do not see the person as an other. We see them as us. We believe that they see the world exactly as we see the world. We project ourselves onto them. There are all kinds of problems with that.

When I was studying at McCormick Seminary in Chicago, our pastoral care professor, a wonderful man named Dr. Homer Ashby, told us pastors-in-training that in pastoral care, you never say to someone, “I know exactly what you’re going through.” Or “I know exactly how you feel.” You never say that because while you think you may be trying to empathize with them, what you are truly displaying is your arrogance because you can never know exactly what they are going through because you are not them. You can never know exactly how they are feeling because you do not carry in you all of the experiences that have shaped them.

Dr. Asby said if you are trying to empathize with a person, ask them, “So, how are you feeling about all this?” “How are you handling all this?” And you listen. That’s how you empathize. When we react to the world in an I-I way, we project on

others our own experiences and understandings and assumptions and most often it doesn't work.

In these years with you as one of your pastors, I have been privileged to officiate at a number of weddings. I met with one couple before the ceremony and learned more about their story. I asked them how they met and how they fell in love and when they knew they wanted to marry the other. After a wonderful marriage ceremony, it was a few weeks later that I saw them here in worship. I greeted them afterward and hugged them and asked, "How are you doing?" And the young woman said, "We're doing really well now. But just after our honeymoon, we had our first big fight." "Oh?" I said. "Yes," she said. "It was kind of dumb but it was about breakfast." "You mean it was over breakfast?" I asked. "No," she said. "It was about breakfast."

It turns out that she grew up in a loving home where both her parents worked so breakfast for her family was boxes of cereal, maybe some fruit, whatever you could find in the refrigerator. Her dad and mom, her sisters, everyone, fended for themselves. That was breakfast.

He grew up in a loving home with his mom who was a full-time homemaker. Every morning, she would get up early and make a full, hot breakfast for him, his dad, his little brother and little sister. Every morning. Pancakes and sausages. Homemade biscuits with eggs and bacon. Real hashbrowns with onions and cheese and peppers. That was breakfast.

So these newlyweds come home from their honeymoon and she is the earlier riser so she gets up and kisses him and says, "Hey, I'll get breakfast." And he says, "Great, babe. Thank you." A little while later, he wakes up and it occurs to him that he doesn't smell anything. Odd. So he goes downstairs to their kitchen and there she is reading her iPad and eating a bowl of cereal. She put out another bowl and spoon. There were some bananas on the table and orange juice and milk. That was it.

He looks at her and the table and says, "Where's breakfast?" And at first, she thinks he's being playful and so she smiles and says, "Right

here, silly." And he says, "That's not breakfast." At which point she begins to realize he is being serious and she says, "Excuse me?" And he says, "You said you were getting breakfast. This is not breakfast. Everyone knows this is not breakfast. You lied. You said you were getting breakfast." Well, now she is getting angry and says incredulously, "What are you talking about? I didn't lie. I said I was getting breakfast. This is breakfast. What? Were you expecting bacon and eggs?" "At the very least," he says. First fight. Big fight. They said to me, "Next time, when you meet with people before marrying them, you might ask them to define breakfast."

I-it; our relationship with things, objects. I-thou; our relationship with others. I-I; our projecting ourselves onto others.

Buber goes on to say in the third part of his book that the "I-Divine Thou" relationship, the human-God relationship, is the greatest relationship of all. He is clear. We are not God. God is not us. God is God. God is the Divine Thou, the divine other. The Mighty God. The all-knowing, all-present, all-powerful God. Theologians call these the "omnis." God is all-knowing—omniscient. God is all-present—omnipresent. God is all-powerful—omniscient.

Because Jesus is God incarnate, Jesus is omniscient, omnipresent, omnipotent. So here's where I have to be careful. If I don't attend to it, I can fall into that dangerous I-I relationship with God. I can get so arrogant that I think I know all about God, all about Jesus, all about the Holy Spirit and how God is at work in the world. Then I have placed myself in God's place. God is holy and wholly God and we are not. Pay attention. You may think you know the whole story of Christmas, but watch and wait. You will be surprised. Because in this I-Thou relationship, Jesus is about to show you something new.

American writer Annie Dillard writes in her book, "Teaching a Stone to Talk," "On the whole, I do not find Christians outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one

believe a word of it?”¹ Dillard says we should not come to worship expecting to be comfortable. Ushers should not be handing out worship bulletins. Instead, they should be giving each of us crash helmets. We should have seat belts in the pews to strap ourselves in because we are about to encounter the mighty God—the God of the universe and we will be changed!

This Christmas story... it is not new for many of us. You may be saying to yourself as I do, “I got this.” Brace yourself. We are waiting. Expect, anticipate, that the Mighty God is going to surprise you. Perhaps even about breakfast.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

1 Annie Dillard. *Teaching a Stone To Talk*, 1982, p. 58.