

The Passion of the Psalms: Justice & Righteousness

July 6, 2008

Year A: Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

Camp Norwesca; near Chadron, Nebraska
Chadron United Methodist Church; Chadron, Nebraska

A Rabbi loved the game of golf but his busy schedule prevented him from playing as often as he wanted. He gave into temptation one Saturday and because it was the Sabbath he drove 50 miles from his home so as not to be recognized. On the 3rd hole (a par 3) Moses looked down from heaven and says to God, "Look at that, even after 2000 years they are still laying burdens on the people that he cannot keep, he should be punished."

God responded, "I will take care of it." The Rabbi hits his tee shot and it goes straight to the green takes two hops and goes into the hole - a hole in one.

Moses is beside himself. He says, "God, I thought you were going to punish him and instead you reward him with a once in a lifetime event, a hole in one."

God replies, "I did punish him."

Moses asks, "How?"

And God answers, "A hole-in-one on the Sabbath. Who is he going to tell?"¹

I think of that joke every time I drive by the golf course on Sunday mornings either to or coming from Norwesca. Today, we continue our sermon series for this summer – *The Passion of the Psalms*. Our subject for this morning is one that is mentioned a lot in these wonderful texts: justice and righteousness. <Hymn #577 – Norwesca / Hymn #795 – Sanctuary>

[Psalm 72:1-20 \(NRSV\)](#)

Give the king your justice, O God, and your righteousness to a king's son.

²May he judge your people with righteousness, and your poor with justice. ³May the mountains yield prosperity for the people, and the hills, in righteousness.

⁴May he defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the needy, and crush the oppressor.

⁵May he live while the sun endures, and as long as the moon, throughout all generations. ⁶May he be like rain that falls on the mown grass, like showers that water the earth. ⁷In his days may righteousness flourish and peace abound, until the moon is no more.

⁸May he have dominion from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth. ⁹May his foes bow down before him, and his enemies lick the dust.

¹⁰May the kings of Tarshish and of the isles render him tribute, may the kings of Sheba and Seba bring gifts. ¹¹May all kings fall down before him, all nations give him service.

¹ "Rabbi & hole in one." *Seth's Compiled List of Jokes & Illustrations, Part II.* 37.

¹²For he delivers the needy when they call, the poor and those who have no helper. ¹³He has pity on the weak and the needy, and saves the lives of the needy. ¹⁴From oppression and violence he redeems their life; and precious is their blood in his sight.

¹⁵Long may he live! May gold of Sheba be given to him. May prayer be made for him continually, and blessings invoked for him all day long. ¹⁶May there be abundance of grain in the land; may it wave on the tops of the mountains; may its fruit be like Lebanon; and may people blossom in the cities like the grass of the field. ¹⁷May his name endure forever, his fame continue as long as the sun. May all nations be blessed in him; may they pronounce him happy.

¹⁸Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel, who alone does wondrous things. ¹⁹Blessed be his glorious name forever; may his glory fill the whole earth. Amen and Amen.

What a beautiful and wonderful place this text describes. Where rain falls down, where peace abounds, where there is abundance of food – this is an ideal, a beautiful place - a place, truly of justice and righteousness. Now this place is not a utopia. We tend to think of that concept as something perfect, something that we will never be achieved. This is not a description of a utopia, in fact, this Psalm is really a plea for the King to act in a certain way. This is a plea for our ruler to lead with the heart of God.

An adolescent boy, not noted for his honesty, one day stole a peach from a woman's tree. She saw him. The next day, she stopped him and asked him to deliver a basket of peaches to an elderly, sick lady. And she gave him the largest peach in the basket. As time went on, she and her husband trusted the boy to do other errands and tasks around their home. He always performed honestly. And he grew up to be an honest man.

Goethe once said, "If you treat a man as he is, he will stay as he is; but if you treat him as if he were what he ought to be, and could be, he will become that bigger and better man."²

What I love about this illustration is that the focus is not so much on what we should be doing – although that is important – we should be following God's standard for justice and righteousness. The focus here is on what we ought to be doing for God's world. Are we doing everything we can to make this world a better place? Are we treating others with justice and righteousness? And if we are, is our motivation simply to make our lives better or do we live by the standard set out by God so we can lift up the whole world.

Folks, any discussion about justice and righteousness would not be complete without spending time on our motivation? Why should we act justly and righteously? What motivates us to treat other people by a standard set forth from God? When I was in college I remember hearing a speaker tell us that we should treat others well because you never know when it will come back to help you. In some respects, I agree with that statement but that is not a motivating

² Dan Safarik. "Treating boy the way he ought to be." *Ibid., Part IV.* 40.

factor for justice and righteousness. For example, are we kind to our kids only because they will be determining our nursing home? Do we pray only because we expect a reward from God? Are we respectful in this life only because we believe something good will come out of it? Believing we should treat others well only because we may some day get something out of it is not a motivation for living by this standard of God.

Or should we be motivated by justice and righteousness so that we can even the playing field. I'm talking about retribution. I'm talking about making some pay for what they've done. Some of you know that this week our church was broken in to. We had some damage and the only thing taken was Jan's laptop and my digital camera. My camera – I just got it while I was down in Lincoln. I have been wanting that camera so long so I can use it with our church's web-site. And the break-ins haven't stopped with our church. At least three other churches that we know of have been hit.

Folks, it is so easy to go to that place of revenge and believe that justice means getting back at those guys. I know what it feels like to feel vulnerable. Like many of you who have been burglarized we want retribution. We want our stuff back. We want to feel safe. We want justice and righteousness.

Folks, you don't know how hard it was to work on this text and have those feelings build up inside of me because that is not the definition of justice and righteousness found here. The motivation to live by the standard of justice and righteousness is found in these very words. Listen again starting at verse 15: **15**Long may he live! May gold of Sheba be given to him. May prayer be made for him continually, and blessings invoked for him all day long. **16**May there be abundance of grain in the land; may it wave on the tops of the mountains; may its fruit be like Lebanon; and may people blossom in the cities like the grass of the field. **17**May his name endure forever, his fame continue as long as the sun. May all nations be blessed in him; may they pronounce him happy.

This is God's standard of justice and righteousness. Our motivation is to treat others the way God wants us to treat all of humanity. And here is the best part, when we treat others with respect, with kindness, with opportunities for prosperity, the whole world succeeds. Here is the motivating factor. If we treat others by this standard of God then all of God's Creation does better and when God's children began to prosper, our life gets better. The motivation is not what we can do so that some day we will be rewarded. The motivation is not evening the playing field. The motivation is to make this a better place for everyone to live.

One of my family's favorite movies is *Pay it Forward*. The story begins with a boy raised by a single mom who is struggling. He sees her goodness be repaid time and time again by others who simply take advantage of her. In one of his classes he is challenged by his teacher to come up with a project to make the world a better place. This boy decides to use the message of kindness to change the world but not for personal gain. His first act is done for a homeless man. When that man wants to repay the favor, the boy says no – you must pay it forward. And that is what happens in much of the movie. Each kind act done for one is paid forward to another. There is no personal gain in helping out another

but as we see in the movie, this community becomes stronger, people feel safer, and things literally do get better for most all because the motivation is to treat people by a higher standard – God’s standard of justice and righteousness. The movie is literally living out Psalm 72.

Folks, this motivation to lift up the world began to play its self out to me this week. The day of the break-in was not a good day for me. It started out with a terrible walk with our new puppy. She simply would not walk. She spent most of the time on her butt defying the leash. Maybe you saw me that morning. I was frustrated. And then I get to the church we find this break-in and some of you know how hard it is to get any work done after something like that. My day just went from bad to worse. But that night I saw a movie that I wanted to see for a very long time. That movie renewed my belief in God’s sense of justice and righteousness. It is called *Glory Road* and is the true story of Coach Haskins and his Texas Western – now Texas-El Paso – basketball team. He’s hired to turn around a losing program and he does this by recruiting black players. In 1966, in the south, one simply do not do this. However, he takes players that other teams won’t touch because of their color and he begins to win. And the more they win the more this team is resented, hated, demeaned, players are beat-up, during games they spit on, had cups thrown at them – all because they were black and were resented for it. But Coach Haskins knew that to win he needed his best players and he set about teaching them about character, about motivation, and about overcoming the overt racism they faced every day. And as this team won – eventually winning the National Championship – he taught these boys honor and respect for themselves and their teammates both black and white.

Folks, you know that in about a week I head to Texas the very same state where that movie took place. As I watched that movie I realized something. This was only 40 years ago, some one to two generations removed. Now here is one of the interesting things about my trip. My job is to elect a Bishop – a leader of the church. Most of our delegates are from the south and the majority of these people are from Texas. As our group from Nebraska has been meeting we’ve been talking about what or colleagues from the south are saying. To some they are a bit surprised at some of the overt racism and sexism that we hear. One fine young woman from Kansas we’ve been told will probably not be elected a Bishop because she’s a woman and she’s African-American. Or were told we’ll elect another person of color but don’t expect them to serve in their Conference.

As I watched this movie and thought about my trip to elect a Bishop I thought of what that Coach and that team did some 40 years ago. You see their motivation was to win but it was also justice and righteousness. Recruit your best players no matter the skin color. Teach them respect and in turn you will make the world a better place.

Now folks, I’ve told you what we’ve heard about our upcoming trip. We know we’re going to see racism and sexism, but we will also see Psalm 72 in action. I go to Texas with another rumor that I’ve heard. It has to do with a man who is considered the leading candidate to be elected for Bishop. I am ecstatic because he’s also my number one choice. In the heart of Texas – the south – a place characterized by racism in that movie an African-American man, a DS from

Houston, I believe, will be elected as a leader for this church. And what excites me is that church will prosper under his leadership and vision.

Folks, that is the motivating factor of justice and righteousness. We must lead by God's standard to treat all of God's children with honor and respect, and then and only then will God's people will, and isn't that better for everyone?
Amen.

The Passion of the Psalms: Abandonment

Dad – beach – 4 yr old: seagull lay dead in sand

Daddy what happened to him?

Dad: He died & went to heaven

Boy thought – “Did God throw him back down?”

Another funny – gets lots of laughs – sure heard before

UM Preacher / Rabbi / Hindu – car broke down

Nearby farm – stay the night

Extra bed – double bed, 1 stay in barn – Hindu volunteered, others got comfortable

Knock: sorry, cow in barn, cows sacred – Rabbi made way to barn

Knock: sorry, pig in barn, pigs unclean – UM pastor made way

Another knock – standing @ door: cow & pig

Include some funnies – subject: down rt serious

Not only diff to preach – even harder to hear

Abandonment – not talking about left @ curb

Not getting kicked out of club

Not – snubbed by friend

Talking – feeling of loneliness / despair / depression

Talking – feeling: no body cares what happens

No one to turn to – not even God

Psalm 13 / Hymn #746

Ouch! What a Txt!

Why choose: The Passion of the Psalms

Passion – doesn’t have to be: love

Passion – intense feeling toward some thing / one

This Psalm – Passion / intense feeling – belief: God abandon / enemies

Church – preacher / Music Dir not getting along – spilled into worship

1st Week – commitment, *“I Shall not be Moved”*

2nd Week – tithing, give gladly to God. *“Jesus Paid it All”*

3rd Week – gossiping, watch our tongues. *“I Love to Tell the Story”*

Preacher disgusted – following Sunday, thinking of resigning

“Oh, Why Not Tonight?”

Preacher – resigned – next week: JC led him there, JC taking him away

“What a Friend We Have in Jesus”

Sorry – 1 more funny

I’m doing – sermon – do my own life

Way of coping – serious subject

Use humor – deflect dealing w/ abandonment

Done whole life

Had feeling of loneliness

Feeling left out

Not fitting in

Feeling ostracized – diff

Bullied in grade school

Not accepted for who I was

Learned – cope: making jokes

Get people to laugh – feel accepted

Subject – abandonment: passionate about

When Psalmist mentions abandonment – feeling God isn’t listening / doesn’t care

Doesn’t use humor – cope

Takes grievance directly to God

V. 5 – 6

Why this change?

Wasn’t txt – about angry w/ God?

Wasn’t passage – letting God know how feel?

Why change – tone?

Remember – start of series on Psalms – pastoral care

Complaint / problem / joy – Temple / Synagogue – leader – choose appropriate

Either sing / read – Heb designation “**Selah**” – prayer / sermonette

Specific

This Psalm – no “Selah”

Perhaps lost over time – if included, between vs. 4-5: something changes

Scholar – what changes: not their situation, they have changed

Enrico Caruso – It tenor – greatest masters
Later life – confidence enormous – beginning: unsure / uncertain
Opening night of Opera – waiting to go on, stage fright
Throat – constricted / Perspiration poured / Shaking w/ fear
Stagehands heard – “Out! You miserable ‘little me,’ get out of my way! Out!
Out!”
Tremendous effort – will – changed self image
Saying to fearful / timid element inside
That strong / positive element – must / would prevail
Fierce counterattack – “little me” – shrank away
Onstage – sang w/ beauty / power – characteristic of Caruso
Bravo

Like Caruso – ability: change “little me”
Situation around us – may not be changing – we can adapt
Way we cope

Some use humor / cry / chocolate / retreat

Psalmist: these not appropriate – cope – ult feeling of abandonment
Must bring problems / pains / despair – feet of God, know how feel
Be honest – God
Here, tell you – OK
Believe – do more

Parishioner – wouldn’t enter church bldg: guilty over anger w/ God
Sit on steps – wouldn’t go in
Young woman – coll – affair w/ man (twice age), already married
Spoke – angry: got into situation
Angry – nothing stopped her
Said – be angry w/ God – simply couldn’t do it – why didn’t go Church
Kushner – *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*

Relates the story of a boy who becomes mentally ill because he can’t handle his anger at his father. Michael Gordon loves and admires his father so much that he can’t face the fact that he often resents him and feels angry toward him. The psychiatrist, Danny Saunders, is able to help Michael because he has had to work through his own ambivalent feelings of love-hate-admiration-anger toward his own powerful, admirable, dominating father, and has done so successfully. Kushner contrasts that success story with that of Rabbi Kalman, a teacher in the rabbinical seminary attended by Danny’s best friend. Rabbi Kalman is a survivor of the Holocaust. His wife and children died in the concentration camps. He is a rigidly Orthodox Jew who considers it a sin even to raise questions about God and why He does things the way He does. One must believe wholeheartedly, without doubts.

Kushner contrasts these two individuals. He writes, “Just as Michael became sick because he couldn’t handle his anger at his father, Rabbi Kalman has become a tyrannical, unsympathetic person because he can’t face up to his anger at his Father in Heaven. Rabbi Kalman permits no doubting, no questing of God, because somewhere in the recesses of his mind he knows how furiously angry he is at God for the death of his family, and he knows that any questions will end in an angry outburst against God, maybe even the rejection of God and religion entirely. And he can’t risk that happening.”

Then Kushner writes, Michael is made whole by being taught not to be afraid of his anger. His anger is normal, understandable, and a lot less destructive than he has believed. He is told, to his immense relief, that it is all right to be angry at people you love. But no one tells Rabbi Kalman that it is all right to be angry at God.

1 – several stories: famous book
Kushner – grips, taking place w/ son
Progeria, rapid aging syndrome
Every rt to be angry / mad @ God

Took to heart Psalm – wrote book, he could change

Intro: “I am fundamentally a religious man who has been hurt by life, and I wanted to write a book that could be given to the person who has been hurt by life – by death, by illness or injury, by rejection or disappointment – and who knows in his heart that if there is justice in the world, he deserved better. What can God mean to such a person? Where can he turn for strength and hope?”

Concludes: always turn to God
Agree – God big enough, take our anger
Agree w/ Psalmist – permission, let God know when prayer unanswered
OK: tell God – grieving, still lonely
Acceptable: God, worked hard, not getting what deserved
Permission: Life isn't fair
 Go ahead – bring grievances to God, remember God big enough
 Take it – always love us, no matter what
Story – Holocaust
 Concentration camp – put God on trial, allowing Holocaust to happen
 Judge / jury / prosecutor / Def Attorney
 Trial went on
Verdict – God found GUILTY
 Didn't stop Holocaust, allowed it to happen
 After trial – after verdict – They had worship
For / Against God – can't be w/out God
F, who do we turn – when angry?
 Feel safe: parents / best friend / close colleague
 Psalm says: OK / safe – also turn to God