

## The Treasure of the Church; Justice and Hope Sunday

Psalm 82

Westside Fellowship CRC; 3 March 2019

Rev. Heidi S. De Jonge

This is the children's Bible we've been reading lately at night: (*The 365 Day Children's Bible Storybook*, published by Scandinavia Publishing House). And we'll be reading along and we'll get to a section like this (pick something with violence – or maybe the whole Goliath sequence) and Tim and I will look at each other and the kids will look at us and we'll be simultaneously grateful (on the one hand) that our children's Bible doesn't skip over all of the hardest bits of Scripture and (on the other hand) finding ourselves wishing at the end of a long day of work and school, with piano practicing and homework and dishes looming that our children's Bible skipped over all of the hardest bits of Scripture.

There are a lot of tough spots in Scripture – even like last week, if you were here, where Moses blesses the tribe of Joseph with the strength of a wild ox with horns that will gore the nations to the ends of the earth. I learned in my reading recently that "there are 'six hundred passages of explicit violence in the Hebrew Bible, one thousand verses where God's own violent actions of punishment are described, a hundred passages where Yahweh expressly commands others to kill for no apparent reason... Violence ... is easily the most mentioned activity and central theme of the Hebrew Bible.'"<sup>1</sup>

Though what I have to say this morning will not collapse all the tension that we feel with this reality, I want to say two things quite clearly and simply today... things that are helpful to me as a theologian/pastor and that are helpful to me as a mom. First of all, not every text of Scripture has as much weight as every other text of Scripture. There are texts that are what you might want to call central texts... Texts that we use as lenses through which we interpret all the other texts. So, that's the first thing – *THAT* there are central texts.

And the second thing: *HOW* are central texts chosen? Central texts like these are chosen because of the frequency of their theme in Scripture and because of how they get repeated between the Old and the New Testaments... Central texts are seen as central because they

---

<sup>1</sup> "Allard, Pierre and Northey, Wayne, "Christianity: the Rediscovery of Restorative Justice" in *The Spiritual Roots of Restorative Justice*, Michael L. Hadley, ed., p. 122.

reflect the trajectory of Scripture – the movement of Scripture to Christ and to the sending of the Spirit and the restoring of creation.

This text in Psalm 82 has a centrality to it – a *gravitas* – an importance. Not only is the message in it a frequent one in Scripture, but it is a message that reflects the movement of Scripture. Basically, in this text, we see that a “god” stands or falls on the foundation of whether or not that “god” defends the weak and the fatherless, upholds the cause of the poor and the oppressed, rescues the weak and the needy. By extension, our legitimacy as God-followers stands or falls on the foundation of whether or not we defend the weak and the fatherless, uphold the cause of the poor and the oppressed, rescue the weak and the needy. Anything less is a combination of foolishness, darkness, and shaky ground.

I chose this passage for this week because it highlights the justice of God. What is the justice of God? Well, in about the 4<sup>th</sup> century, Constantine turned Christianity into the official religion and the persecuted church became the persecuting church. Ever since then, a Christian perspective on God’s justice has focused on conquering and exterminating pagans, Jews, outsiders, and eventually criminals.<sup>2</sup> The watchword of the church before the church had all the power was “The Church Abhors the Shedding of Blood.” And when they came into power, they took the sign of the cross – the sign meant to be the end of violence – and declared, “In This Sign Conquer.”<sup>3</sup>

When you go back to Scripture and look at the trajectory of Scripture and the life of Jesus, the justice of God is different. It is about the re-establishing of Shalom. And re-establishing shalom is about making sure that those who are weak have a strong place to stand and to speak... it is about making sure that the fatherless have status and a voice in the community... It is about making sure that the poor and the oppressed have a foothold from which to fight for their cause. Theologian Perry Yoder says, ‘God’s justice is a response to the lack of shalom in order to create the conditions of shalom.’<sup>4</sup>

The justice of God is a justice that gives voice and dignity to *all* those who are part of a broken situation... (repeat)... it is a justice that moves toward healing and hope. It is a

---

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 126.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 125.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 121.

restorative justice that is light and wisdom and firm foundation... We are rediscovering the biblical roots of justice and hope – and these roots point us to the God of Psalm 82 – the God who is Jesus Christ. The God whose movement is always ‘downwards and to the periphery,’<sup>5</sup> the God who claims ‘unconditional solidarity with those who have nothing, those who suffer, the humiliated and injured.’

I love that Nyla-Jean pointed me to another verse of Scripture when she read my Facebook call to worship. Their family had just read Zechariah 7:9 in their family devotions: “This is what the Lord Almighty said: Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion onto one another. Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the foreigner or the poor. Do not plot evil against each other.”

I read a story this week in a sermon by Jack Van De Hoef of Brockville... that I had never heard before and it connects beautifully with this text.<sup>6</sup>

The St. Lawrence river is named after a deacon in the Christian church in the third century. He was responsible for the material goods of the Church. He was quite generous, especially to the poor.

During a time of persecution by Emperor Valerian, Lawrence expected to be arrested, so he sought out the poor, widows, and orphans and gave them all the money he had on hand, selling even the sacred vessels to increase the sum. When the prefect of Rome heard of this, he imagined that the Christians must have considerable treasure.

He sent for Lawrence and said, “You Christians say we are cruel to you, but that is not what I have in mind. I am told that your priests offer in gold, that the sacred blood is received in silver cups, that you have golden candlesticks at your evening services. Now, your doctrine says you must render to Caesar what is his. Bring these treasures, for the emperor needs them to maintain his forces.”

Lawrence replied that the Church was indeed rich. “I will show you its value. Give me time to set everything in order and make an inventory.” Over three days he gathered a great number of blind, lame, crippled, leprous, orphaned, and widowed persons and put them in

---

<sup>5</sup> Michael Gorringe in Allard and Northy, p. 135-136.

<sup>6</sup> <https://network.crcna.org/social-justice/justice-and-advocacy-sermon-psalm-821-8>

rows. When the prefect arrived, Lawrence simply said, "These are the treasure of the Church." The prefect was so angry that he had Lawrence burned at the stake.

And this just leads me to wonder, what are our treasures? If we treasure our interpretations of Scripture more than we treasure the weak and the fatherless, do we worship God or "gods"? If we treasure our traditions and our music and our creeds and confessions more than we treasure the poor and oppressed, do we worship God or "gods"? If we treasure the sacraments of the water of baptism and the bread and the juice of communion and the way that we think these should be administered more than we treasure the weak and the needy, do we worship God or "gods"? Not to mention all the other gods we might worship – gods of money or power or influence or popularity or political party.

The last verse of Psalm 82 says, "Rise up, O God, Judge the earth for all the nations are your inheritance." All the nations of the earth are God's inheritance, God's treasured possession. John 3:16 – a central text if there ever was one – says, For God so loved, so treasured the world – all the world – all the nations – that he gave his one and only son. He is justice. He is hope. He is our treasure and we are his.