The Singing Garden Part 5

Royal and Prophetic Hymns

Psalm 72

October 11, 2020

North UMC

Three Presidents have commissioned poets to write and read a poem for their inaugurations: Kennedy, Clinton, and Obama. The poets and the poems:

* 2013: [Richard Blanco](https://poets.org/poet/richard-blanco), ["One Today"](https://poets.org/poem/one-today)
* 2009: [Elizabeth Alexander](https://poets.org/poet/elizabeth-alexander), "[Praise Song for the Day"](https://poets.org/poem/praise-song-day)
* 1997: [Miller Williams](https://poets.org/poet/miller-williams), "[Of History and Hope](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/national/longterm/inaug/mon/poem.htm)"
* 1993: [Maya Angelou](https://poets.org/poet/maya-angelou), "[On the Pulse of Morning](http://www.ssc.wisc.edu/~oliver/soc220/Lectures220/Angelou.htm)”
* 1961: [Robert Frost](https://poets.org/poet/robert-frost), "[The Gift Outright](https://www.jfklibrary.org/Research/Research-Aids/Ready-Reference/JFK-Fast-Facts/Frost-Gift-Outright.aspx)"

If you didn’t know any better, you would not guess they were written for the swearing in of a President. Their subject matter is a celebration of ordinary stuff—Frost and Angelou wrote about the land and geology; the others penned verses about ordinary people doing ordinary things. This is what you celebrate when you inaugurate the leader of a democracy. The people and the land are praised.

Psalm 72 is also an inauguration poem. It is a coronation hymn written for a monarchy and what you celebrate in a monarchy is the king. At first glance, this psalm is little more than a bad poem about the divine right of kings, a ancient piece of political propaganda.

But listen closely. This hymn stung the ears of every monarch who took the throne in Jerusalem, judged the hearts of those wealthy citizens who sang it to the king, and gave hope to every peasant who was subject to their control.

Verse One encapsulates the message that is unpacked in the rest of the song:

“Give the king your justice, O God,

and your righteousness to a king’s son.”

God gives the king justice and righteousness, not the king. The king is not a god and the king is not a law unto himself. There is only one God and God is the ultimate sovereign over Israel.

What kind of king is this God of the Israelites? Yahweh is king and became their king when Yahweh liberated them from slavery in Egypt. The Exodus was God’s Hebrew Lives Matter movement that liberated them from oppression and led them to Mount Sinai. On Mount Sinai the Hebrews pledged their allegiance to God, they replaced the pharaoh with Yahweh.

As their king, Yahweh made a covenant with them. The heart of that covenant is summed up in two words: justice and righteousness. You hear them in verse one as you do 65 other times in the psalms. God’s standard of justice is the protection and liberation of the weakest members of society. Unlike some governments, God’s legal system is not rigged to defend the wealthy and powerful through technicalities and retribution. God’s justice lifts up the poor, the widow, the orphan, and the immigrant and creates fairness that promotes the common good. The common good is God’s righteousness.

Righteousness is God’s vision of a rightly ordered world. Righteousness the standard for justice, and justice is the maintenance of righteousness.

Doing justice and pursuing righteousness is how we live out our covenant with God through the law, as it says in Deuteronomy:

“For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them with food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” (10:17-19)

When the people and their leaders violated the covenant, the prophets called them back to these covenantal obligations, as Jeremiah did:

“Hear the word of the Lord, O King of Judah sitting on the throne of David—you, and your servants, and your people who enter these gates. Thus says the Lord: Act with justice and righteousness, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor anyone who has been robbed. And do no wrong or violence to the alien, the orphan, and the widow, nor shed innocent blood in this place.” (22:2-3)

In fact, when justice was done and righteousness was created, it resulted in shalom for all. Shalom, or peace, will “abound” for the every citizen, rich and poor; peace will be extended to the nation’s relationship with the surrounding empires, from Tarshish to Sheba; indeed, peace will flourish in the environment “like showers that water the earth” create a fertile balance among the people and the land and all creatures.

And so it was fitting that the coronation hymn for the kings began with this reminder and appeal to justice and righteousness:

“Give the king your justice, O God,

and your righteousness to a king’s son.”

There was only one thing the king had to do to do justice and pursue righteousness. He had to defend the weakest members of society:

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

This is what it meant for the king to do justice. And when this was done, righteousness would be established. This is criterion for evaluating the king:

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

Indeed, this is the only stated responsibility of the king. The psalm does not command him to lower taxes, balance a budget, build up the military, expand the bureaucracy, or please the majority. This one thing is the criterion for determining how he must handle all those other responsibilities. For Psalm 72, all those other things are to be directed and shaped by this fundamental divine calling.

The king is not a god and not a law unto himself. He is merely an instrument, a mediator, of king Yahweh who is the God of the oppressed, and if the king is doing his job then he is defending the cause of the poor and showing mercy on the weak.

Little did the king and his entourage realize how indicting this hymn was. It is attributed to King Solomon, and perhaps he himself wrote it, or perhaps someone in his administration penned it. For all his wisdom, he did not perform justice consistently nor did he always place the needs of the weak as his top priority. He built the Temple using forced labor. First, he conscripted Israelites to cut the wood. Keep in mind, there were two kingdoms at that time—Israel in the north and Judea in the south—and he was the monarch of both, even though he was from the south. He played favorites and forced the northern citizens, the Israelites, to do the work. Then, later, he conscripted non-Jewish residents to finish the job.

All the while, he was cutting lavish deals with foreign nations. He indebted his kingdom with payments for luxuries to surrounding countries. And all those wives he married, which the Bible describes as his downfall, those were foreign alliances.

Chickens came home to roost only after his death. Deep-seated resentment among the northern Israelites resulted in a divided kingdom. The obligations to other nations came due, and idolatry flourished to keep an impossible peace. And all the while, the poor suffered and the weak were oppressed.

Psalm 72 is a warning to us. In a democracy, it is the people who are tasked with doing justice and pursuing righteousness, and we have failed as Americans and as Christians. The words of this psalm are a ringing indictment of the way we have treated undocumented immigrants at our southern border. The separation of children, including nursing infants, from their parents violates God’s justice. This issue may not be in the headlines but it is on God’s mind.

In 2008—ten years before these recent events—the General Conference of the United Methodist Church echoed God’s standard of justice with this resolution: “[T]he General Conference is in support of just and fair immigration policies that benefit and allow the family to preserve and maintain its unity.” In the spirit of the prophets, they declared:

“To refuse to welcome migrants to this country—and to stand by in silence while families are separated, individual freedoms are ignored, and the migrant community in the United States is demonized by members of Congress and the media—is complicity to sin.” (*2008 Book of Resolutions*, pp. 418, 422)

There can and should be legitimate disagreements over how to reform immigration policy, but the current ways we are treating these families is sinful.

We are not kings, we are citizens. Our leaders are not monarchs but they, like Solomon and the others, are called to defend the poor and be kind to the weak. There are three ways we American Christians can live into the liturgy of Psalm 72:

1. Prayer—Psalm 72 is a prayer for the king, asking for God to inspire and guide his leadership. We must pray for all our public officials. Verse four is how we should pray for them: “May they defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the needy, and crush the oppressor.” We should pray that doing justice for the weak is their top priority. We should pray this prayer for all public officials and set aside our ideological prejudices that tempt us to assume that they are incapable of receiving God’s direction. How are you praying for this election? Let verse four be your guide.
2. Participate—God calls the church to be a partner in supporting the common good by working for the wellbeing of the weakest members of society. The church cannot do it on its own, and God’s prevenient grace flows through a variety of other organizations, institutions, and agencies.
3. Protest—There are times when faithfulness is expressed through dissent. There are times when God calls us to speak up and refuse to support public policies when they violate God’s standard of justice. Even our protesting must reflect the way of God:
   1. We protest policies, not people—We must always keep the focus on policies rather than denouncing individuals. Individual leaders are created in the image of God and thus are capable of change and repentance. When we focus on policies rather than personalities, we keep the space open for their redemption. When we protest policies it must focus on the practical effects of those policies. Many a bureaucracy and many an ideology claims to do justice. However, they are to be measured by their fruit.
   2. We protest peacefully—There is no place for name calling. Use of violence is never acceptable. Regardless of one’s ideology or political party it is never justified. Specifically at this moment in our history, as a white Christian I must make explicit our denunciation of white supremacy. From the local sheriff to the President, no politician should tolerate it, minimize it, or equivocate in opposing it. It is up to us as citizens to be very swift and clear in holding our leaders reject it. We are Christians united in Christ who is the Lord of and Savior of all people. To stand for Christ demands that we stand in solidarity with our spiritual siblings who are persons of color and never remain silent in this hour of national crisis.

We immediately think of protesting as marching in the streets and sticking a sign in the front lawn. But the kind of protest I hope you will ponder is the kind that goes unnoticed and unrewarded. This is the protest of the individual who refused to cooperate or tolerate evil and injustice in their place of work, their neighborhood, and their relationships. We must have the moral courage to take a stand when there is no recognition and when it will cost us our comfort. More often than not, this is not about the big issues but rather these moments come along when we are tempted to ignore it and minimize it by saying, “They did not mean it” and “This is not my business” and “It would not do any good if I tried.”

We are called to perform the quiet protest. In his book “On Tyranny,” Timothy Snyder lists 20 ways to prevent autocrats and dictatorships from developing. Number One is “Do not obey in advance.” He calls it “anticipatory obedience” which is giving leaders permission to do and say horrible things through our willingness to ignore and actually doing in small ways those things even before the leader does. Number Five is “Remember professional ethics.” The Nazis were able to gain control of Germany because lawyers, doctors, business leaders, and government administrators violated their professional ethics by following orders. Refusing to implement unethical policies is a quiet protest. It is the quiet protest that speaks the loudest. It is the quiet protest it will continue to be heard because it is the voice of integrity.

Louie Clark has dedicated his life to defending people who have made this quiet protest. Louie is the son of Rev. Somers Clark, who was a member of our annual conference. As a young man, Louie felt a calling and went to seminary. Briefly, he served as a pastor, but he realized that his calling was not to ordained ministry but to the law. In addition to earning his M.Div. he also received a law degree. He is now the executive director of the Government Accountability Project which specializes in representing government whistle blowers, many of which have made the quiet protest that comes from following God’s vision of justice.

In the coming days and weeks, meditate on Psalm 72. Take Psalm 72 into the voting booth. Let God’s standard of justice and vision of righteousness be your guide. Let it be your prayer, let us be partners with all who defend the weak, and let us register our quiet protest when needed.