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Psalm 82
August 14, 2022

Let's Do Something!

Psalm 82 that we are considering today is not one of David's. But of Asaph. From 1 Chronicles we learn that Asaph was one of many men that David put in charge of the music in the house of the Lord after the ark came to rest there.¹ The Bible tells us that "They ministered with music before the tabernacle, the Tent of Meeting, until Solomon built the temple of the Lord in Jerusalem."

The psalter, which is the collection of psalms, contains eleven of Asaph's psalms, 73-83. They were either written directly by him or by some of his descendants.

Psalm 82 is a cry for justice. That God would justly hold those in earthly power accountable for looking out for those who are often the most powerless. The Old Testament has over 400 references to God's justice and 130 references to God's righteousness. In many ways they are interconnected and cannot be separated from one another.

Join me as I read Psalm 82 this morning. It's quite short.

Psalm 82

1 God presides in the great assembly; he renders judgment among the "gods":

2 "How long will you defend the unjust and show partiality to the wicked?"

3 Defend the weak and the fatherless; uphold the cause of the poor and the oppressed.

4 Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked.

5 "The 'gods' know nothing, they understand nothing. They walk about in darkness; all the foundations of the earth are shaken.

6 "I said, 'You are "gods"; you are all sons of the Most High.'

7 But you will die like mere mortals; you will fall like every other ruler."

8 Rise up, O God, judge the earth, for all the nations are your inheritance.

Let us pray. Prayer of Illumination.

During our sabbatical travels to Greece and Scotland this summer and last, I was struck by some of the injustices caused by the British Crown over the years. I noticed while visiting the Acropolis Museum in Athens and the British Museum in

¹ 1 Chronicles 6:31-32, 39; 16:1-6

London that there are pieces of the Parthenon that are “missing” because the British removed them from the archeological site “for safe keeping.” At the time, Athens did not have a proper museum to keep some of the artifacts so the British took them to London which you can see in the British Museum today. However, now that Athens does have such a museum, they are still waiting for England to return their missing pieces.

The question, in this day of post British colonialism and imperialism, is...will the British government do what is right and return these artifacts to their rightful owners?

Psalm 82 answers that question for us. Yes. Someday, the Lord will judge all kings and queens and will make sure that what was unjustly taken from those who were impoverished are returned.

Psalm 82 opens like a scene in a heavenly court room. Imagine God on the throne as judge with the lesser gods standing before him. The Hebrew Elohim is used to describe both the God all power and the lesser god's or those put in power over the earth. The psalmist isn't clear whether he is talking about deities or those in earthly power.

This morning as we talk through Psalm 82, I'd like to address what justice is God handing out? What does the bible say about God's justice? And finally how should we “do” justice as followers of Jesus Christ?

So what is justice? The Hebrew word for justice is mishpat. It means making things right that were wrong. Smoothing out rough places. Straightening out what is crooked. In a nut shell it means simply making other people's problems, our problems.

In Psalm 82, we see how God makes our problems, his problem by taking a stand. The word stand can also be translated as presides. In antiquity and during a tribunal, kings or judges would sit during the case. After they heard the case, they would stand to prescribe their judgment. The standing of God in the psalm indicates that something very important is being decided.

God asks the question to those being judged, “How long will you defend the unjust and show partiality to the wicked?” Now an important thing about scripture is that when God asks a question its never because God doesn't know the answer. He asks to see if we know the answer to his question. Do we have a reasonable excuse for his accusations?

The question implies that we don't have a problem fighting for the wrong causes and the wrong people. Injustice and the wicked. It is both an indictment and command to “Stop” doing what we are doing.

In this case, we can infer that God expects judges and leaders, or those in powerful positions, to protect marginalized people in society. Scripture tells us exactly who we should act justly towards...

In Exodus God says, “Do not take advantage of a widow or an orphan. If you do and they cry out to me, I will certainly hear their cry. My anger will be aroused, and I will kill you with the sword; your wives will become widows and your children fatherless. If you lend money to one of my people among you who is needy, do not be like a moneylender; charge him no interest. If you take your neighbor’s cloak as a pledge, return it to him by sunset, because his cloak is the only covering he has for his body. What else will he sleep in? When he cries out to me, I will hear, for I am compassionate.”²

Psalm 68:5 describes God as “A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows. God sets the lonely in families, he leads forth the prisoners with singing.”³

The Apostle James wrote, “Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.”⁴

Jesus at the start of his public ministry quoted the words of the Prophet Isaiah saying, “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”⁵

However, probably one of the best descriptions of someone acting justly as God would expect comes from the book of Job when Job lays out his defense for why he was blameless and underserving of the calamity brought upon him.

Job said, ““I rescued the poor who cried for help,
and the fatherless who had none to assist them.

The one who was dying blessed me;
I made the widow’s heart sing.

I put on righteousness as my clothing;
justice was my robe and my turban.

I was eyes to the blind
and feet to the lame.

I was a father to the needy;
I took up the case of the stranger.

I broke the fangs of the wicked
and snatched the victims from their teeth.”⁶

² Exodus 22:22-27

³ Psalm 68:5-6a

⁴ James 1:27

⁵ Luke 4:18-19

⁶ Job 29:12-17

So according to these references, we are to judge the powerless and the orphan; maintain the rights of the poverty stricken. Make the powerless poor secure; save them from the hand of the wicked.⁷ Look out for the immigrant. We are to make their problems our problems.

These are who God accuses the lessor God's for neglecting. Psalm 82 says that there is ultimate accountability for this neglect. God is standing, even now, in the divine assembly and charging those who act as his agents on earth, both human and divine.

Scripture further grounds God's justice in Israel's past story with Exodus...we do this because we understand what it is like to have been a people who were exploited in a foreign land. Scripture also points us forward to the future with the actions and words of Jesus.

One of our favorite verses and a core value of Cascades is found in Micah 6:8. "He has show [us] what God desires and what the Lord requires of [us]. But to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with [our] God."

So how do we do justice?

As I understand it, there are two kinds of justice in the criminal system, restorative justice and retributive justice.

Restorative justice is a system of criminal justice which focuses on the rehabilitation of the offender through reconciliation with victims and the community at large. Some examples of these include mediation and conflict resolution programs, family group conferences, victim-impact panels, victim-offender mediation, circle sentencing, and community reparative boards.

Restorative justice aims to make right what was wrong. It not only teaches one not to break the law again, but it aims to heal the offenders, victims, and the community. It's about making crooked places straight, smoothing out rough edges.

Retributive justice is a system of criminal justice based on the punishment of offenders rather than on rehabilitation. In other words, the punishment fits the crime. Eye for eye. Tooth for tooth. Death for taking another person's life.

The justice that Psalm 82 is getting at, however, is a third way of justice. Working to prevent injustice from occurring in the first place. Namely looking out for those who are most vulnerable in society such as the orphan, the widow, the immigrant and the poor.

Which leads me to ask how can we do justice or pursue justice here at Cascades? Well our Mission and Peace Committee, Deacons ministry, and Benevolence Boards are all about showing mercy to those who are most vulnerable in society.

⁷ Job 2

For example, New Hope Opportunites is a school in San Pedro Sula Honduras that was introduced to us by Joe Foster. New Hope Opportunities is about educating vulnerable students and families in one of the poorest communities of the Rivera Hernandez so that they can paint a more hopeful picture of their future. Janet VanFleet, Heather Hartrim-Lowe and Joe Foster serve on New Hope's board of directors. If you want to do justice in Honduras, talk to Janet about how you can join our next mission trip. Better yet, sponsor a child now and then meet them later when you go down. That's doing justice.

Our deacons are constantly looking for how to support vulnerable people in our church family and beyond. Providing rides to doctors appointment, taking meals to people who are sick, or just simply making a phone call to those who are shut in reminds people that they are not alone. That is doing justice.

Our Benevolence Board administers grants to under resourced students and families and to local non profits who serve the homeless in our community. We also partner with local schools and provide grants for programs that their schools cannot typically afford. That's doing justice.

In September, Cascades will be offering Faith and Finance Classes to those families who have benefited from these grants over the years. We hope to teach them how to be wise stewards of the resources God has given them. We are looking for some folks who would serve as mentors during the class and walk along side these young families. If you're interested, talk with me after the service. That's doing justice.

Probably what I'm most proud of recently has been our work with Lutheran Community Services NW and the Afghan resettlement project. Walking along side the two families that we've supported has illuminated the tremendous amount of injustice that immigrants face coming to the United States. Just wading through unbelievable amounts of bureaucracy and red tape is over whelming for me, as an educated English speaker. Imagine how hard it is for someone who doesn't understand our culture or our language. It's been helpful for me to walk a little in their shoes and to see what it takes to make it in our country. That's doing justice.

I'll close with these last thoughts. In 1741, itinerant minister Jonathan Edwards traveled up and down the east coast of the new American colonies preaching a famous sermon titled "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." He spoke of God's wrath and the tormenting fiery pits of hell that awaited all unbelievers. His picture of a judgmental angry God literally scared the hell out of people and turned them to the Christian faith in masses kicking off the First Great Awakening in America.

I, however, appreciated Nancy Bisbee's poem this morning which painted a much kinder image of God as a judge delivering justice. More like a benevolent parent, than an angry judge throwing the gavel at us for our failures. A judge who

is holding us accountable for the wrongs we've made but also keeping track of stars in our life's ledger, guiding us, lovingly shepherding us toward what is right, and restoring us into the family of God.

Ultimately, as Christians, we believe that Jesus, our judged judge, will return one day to judge the living and the dead. At that point he will right what was wrong. He will restore the years the locusts have eaten. And he will reset all of creation back to its original glory of the Garden of Eden. But until that day, we as Jesus' followers are called to proclaim good news to the poor, freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind. To set the oppressed free and to proclaim that this is the year of the Lord's favor.

That's doing justice!

Amen.