

A Walk Through the Psalms: God Judges
Psalm 9; Isaiah 10:1-4; Mark 4:35-41
Salem United Methodist Church; June 24, 2018
Rev. Dr. Sue Shorb-Sterling

As we continue to take “A Walk Through the Psalms,” each week we are invited to read and study a Psalm in preparation for Sunday’s worship. Each Sunday’s Psalm is the lectionary Psalm. Some Psalms offer praise and thanks to God for all that God does for humanity. While others are cries for help and even expressions of anger toward God for not acting on our behalf. This walk through Psalms is both rewarding and challenging. Rewarding in that we are discovering new insights and challenging in that they can be disturbing.

Psalm 9 begins with singing praises to God for acting justly and getting rid of the wicked, evil enemy. These words could be used for a song composed for any Star Wars or super hero movie. The plots for this genre of movies are based on good vs. evil with good overpowering evil. In Psalm 9, God is the superhero who is annihilating evil and creating a just world. Listen again to these phrases from verses 3-8: “My enemies fall and die right in front of you...you destroy the wicked...you’ve erased their names...every enemy is wiped out...even the memory of them is dead...God rules justly...establishes justice...judges fairly.” Yea, God! I can just hear the movie audience cheering God on! Yes, this is what God is all about, judging fairly, getting rid of our enemy, destroying the wicked. We do not know for certain the context for many of the Psalms. This one could have been written during the reign of King David as a celebratory Psalm after winning a battle. Or it could have been written towards the end of the Babylonian exile as the suffering, oppressed Israelites were celebrating their release to return home to Jerusalem. In either scenario, God is on their side, establishing justice and destroying the wicked. There is comfort in knowing God stands for justice and is on our side, too.

Then there is a change in verb tenses in verse 8: from past to present to future-what God has done to what God is to do and will do. No longer is it dualistic, or good vs. evil. Now God from the throne looks down on the whole world, all nations, all peoples. Why? “To set the world’s mess right” to quote Eugene Peterson’s translation of verse 8. This is not a good vs. evil kind of scenario, but a clean-up type of scenario. This week thirteen youth and adults were in Kentucky doing a type of clean-up. They were working on homes that are in a mess. They made some repairs, insulated floors, and built a ramp. In their own way they took a mess and made it right or better. So what does it look like when God sets the world’s mess right by judging people fairly? This is where I begin to feel uncomfortable. God judges everyone for all our actions: historically, collectively, and individually. The Psalm has God sitting on a throne, a seat of authority, looking on our mess, and judging us. What kind of mess does God see? Well, where should we begin? Historically, humans have and still are using religion, faith, scripture, call it what you will, to suppress, oppress, enslave, degrade, and even annihilate individuals, families, communities, and nations. Pick a time in western history: the time of the Roman Empire, the Middle Ages, Renaissance, and any century including today. Pick a culture anywhere in the world during any time period. What injustices come to mind? We can find numerous examples of how one group of people has seen another group as less than equal and done harm to them.

Richard Rohr, a contemplative Franciscan priest, is well known for his spiritual writings and for his Center for Action and Contemplation in New Mexico. The theme of his daily devotionals this week was Justice. In Monday’s devotion he shared an injustice from the fifteenth century. Pope Nicholas V issued the Doctrine of Discovery, *Romanus Pontifex*, a Christian global mission with the purpose to “invade, search out, capture, vanquish, and subdue” non-Christians around the world and take “all movable and immovable goods,” as well as take them and their descendants into perpetual slavery. They were to be converted for the Pope’s use and profit. How does God judge this? Then in Friday’s devotion Rohr shared some of the historical injustices that were done to the Native Americans and are still happening to them in New Mexico. In the sixteenth century Spanish Conquistadors in their search for gold massacred, enslaved, and forced the native peoples to assimilate to Spanish culture and the Catholic religion. One way in which they forced compliance was to cut off a foot of anyone who rebelled. Then there is this injustice. In the late 1800’s Native American children were separated from their families and placed in federal boarding schools for the purpose of removing their native cultural

identity. These children were prohibited from speaking in their native tongue and practicing their beliefs. Today Native Americans in New Mexico are still trying to protect their identity and land.

Who stands with all those who have been treated unjustly? Verse 9 states: “The Lord is a safe place for the oppressed—a safe place in difficult times.” And verse 12 states: God “remembers those who suffer; the Lord hasn’t forgotten their cries for help.” And verse 18: “Because the poor won’t be forgotten forever, the hope of those who suffer won’t be lost for all time.” God becomes hope for the oppressed, the suffering, and the poor.

Throughout human history most of the people in the world have lived a subsistence life and many still are. Those of us who are in the middle class live in comfort and do not experience true injustice. We have all we need and more. We can ignore injustices that are happening around us and still live in comfort. Jesus didn’t live in the middle class. He came and lived in the world of the poor and the oppressed. He ministered to those society cast aside, those on the bottom rung of society: the ill, the prostitutes, the lame, the blind, women, children, and even those who robbed the poor, the tax collectors. Jesus became Psalm 9, a safe place for the oppressed and suffering. He called out the religious leaders who kept the people down through their oppressive interpretation of God’s laws. He spoke about judgment, too. Remember the parable where the king sits his throne and judges the nations? Who enters into eternal life? The ones who cared for those suffering from injustices and oppression: the poor who were hungry, naked, and thirsty; the sick and the imprisoned. Jesus even goes to say that when these folk were cared for, we are caring for him! This parable is a much gentler approach to judgment than what the prophets preached. The prophets didn’t mince words.

The role of the prophets is to speak for God, to tell the people how they would be judged if they didn’t live justly with each other and return to God’s way of living. The prophet Isaiah delivers harsh words of judgment to Israel. He may have been warning them of the wrath to come if they didn’t mend their ways. Or his words may have been an “I told you so” after the Northern Kingdom was destroyed by the Assyrians. No matter, Isaiah’s words proclaim judgment. Again, I cringe at that word. I don’t want to be judged because I just may be found lacking. Or we may be found lacking as a church, a community, a nation?

I also cringed when I read this Psalm because I knew where this Psalm was leading me to preach. We are a diverse congregation politically. Look around and wave to your political conservative and liberal brothers and sisters in Christ. In this congregation we have different views on how our nation should be run. And I am grateful for that. We aren’t created to all think alike. And here we can have open, frank discussions and agree to disagree. However, the role of the preacher is to comfort those who are hurting and to make those who are comfortable squirm. In the past when I have preached on behalf of the poor, some were uncomfortable with the message and accused me of pushing a particular political agenda. Others have criticized me on being too soft on injustices. I hope I can make myself clear. In this sermon I am not promoting any political agenda. I am preaching what I read in this Psalm and other scriptures related to this Psalm that God is on the side of the oppressed, those who suffer, and the poor.

To further make this point, I refer to John Wesley in his sermon, “The New Birth,” where he defines being made in the image of God by using three phrases. One: We are made into the “natural image” of God or the ability to have free will. Two: We are made into the “political image” of God or commanded to care for God’s creation and all of God’s people. Three: We are made in the “moral image” of God in that we are to live holy and just lives. Every member of the human race is made in these three descriptions of the image of God, even those we do not like, we do not respect, and even fear. And each of us have shattered this perfect image because of selfishness and greed, human sin. The Good News and our Hope in judgment is that Jesus came to restore us to the perfect image of God that reflects God’s love and justice for all. Are we there yet? No, we are all a work in the progress of grace. And we can give thanks to God with all our hearts for this!

Holy and Just God, be merciful in your judgment. All nations are made up of humans in whom you have placed your image. Perfect us through your grace to see your image in each other no matter who we are, what our economic status is, what our political views are, where we live, or how much we are suffering. When we feel overwhelmed and are afraid in the midst of the turmoil’s of life, calm our seas, and give us peace. Amen.

Resources: “Justice: Week 2,” Daily Devotions by Fr. Richard Rohr, OFM; “The New Birth,” Sermons by John Wesley

