

Are your ears burning?

Psalm 82

August 19, 2007

*The Lord is my shepherd,
I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters;
he restores my soul.*

How beautiful! How comforting! How appealing! How much we love this psalm and the God it shows us! A God of compassion and tenderness and mercy. A God who provides and protects and blesses.

But this is not Psalm 82. And Psalm 82 is the psalm designated by the revised common lectionary for this Sunday.

*"How ignorant you are! How stupid!
You are completely corrupt,
and justice has disappeared from the world."*

That's Psalm 82! Anybody detect a change in mood?

The psalms are an extraordinary body of literature, the worship book and song book and devotional book of the Hebrew people. Their content encompasses the full range of human feeling and human experience, and as such, the psalms provide for us a touchpoint for the full range of our human feelings and experience: gratitude and grief, ecstasy and depression, anger and love, pride and shame, desire and doubt.

But, at the same time, the psalms provide for us a witness to the full range of God's personality. The God we encounter in scripture is a real being, a real person, not just the God we suppose or want our God to be. That's why it's so important to study and know the Bible as a whole, to keep us from worshiping an idol of our own creation, a God we know from reading just our own favorite parts of the Bible.

What do you suppose God wants of us? What do you suppose God most wants of us? I believe God wants most of us what we most want ... relationship. Relationship with us, with us humans. To be known and to be loved. The psalms provide a way to know God, to know the God who is merciful and loving, kind and generous, comforting and forgiving and unceasingly gracious, but to know too the God who is passionate about justice, the God who is affronted and angered by injustice.

With that in mind, hear Psalm 82:

*God presides in the heavenly council;
in the assembly of the gods he gives his decision:
"You must stop judging unjustly;
you must no longer be partial to the wicked!
Defend the rights of the poor and the orphans;
be fair to the needy and the helpless.
Rescue them from the power of the evil people.*

*"How ignorant you are! How stupid!
You are completely corrupt,
and justice has disappeared from the world.
'You are gods,' I said;
'all of you are children of the Most High.'
But you will die like mortals;
your life will end like that of any prince."*

Are your ears burning?

God says: *You must stop judging unjustly ...*

Are you familiar with the 100:1 ratio? The 100:1 ratio is the rule embedded in our legal system that makes the penalty for selling five grams of crack cocaine the same as the penalty for selling 500 grams of powder cocaine. Why? Well, for what demographic is each the drug of choice?

A report by the Death Penalty Information Center finds that: *Even though blacks and whites are murder victims in nearly equal numbers, 80% of people executed since the death penalty was reinstated have been executed for murders involving white victims.*

Another report reveals that 80% of the death penalty cases filed from 1995-2000 targeted racial minority defendants, and that 40% of the cases seeking approval for the death penalty came from just five jurisdictions.

Ninety-five percent of defendants charged in capital cases are too poor to afford their own attorneys. George McFarland was sentenced to death in 1992 while represented by an attorney who slept during parts of the trial. The presiding judge had this to say: *The Constitution says everyone's entitled to the attorney of their choice. The Constitution does not say the lawyer has to be awake.*

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God says: *You must no longer be partial to the wicked ...*

Augusto Pinochet, Ferdinand Marcos, the Shah of Iran, Manuel Noriega, the Somozas, the Duvaliers, the Khmer Rouge, Saddam Hussein. These are all leaders to whom we have been partial, whom we supported and befriended, until they no longer served our purposes.

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God says: *Defend the rights of the poor and the orphans ...*

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is a document adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1948 and endorsed by the United States. It enumerates these rights, among others:

- *everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person*
- *no one shall be held in slavery or servitude*
- *no one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment*
- *everyone has the right to recognition everywhere as a person before the law*
- *all are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to equal protection of the law*

- everyone has the right to work, and to just and favourable conditions of work ... the right without any discrimination to equal pay for equal work ... the right to just and favourable remuneration ensuring an existence worthy of human dignity
- everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and his family including food, clothing, housing and medical care
- higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit

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God says: *Be fair to the needy and the helpless ...*

HUD's "One Strike and You're Out" policy *permits public housing authorities to evict any tenant for any drug-related criminal activity on or off the tenant's public housing premises committed by any member of the household, a guest, or other person under the tenant's control regardless of whether the tenant was involved in or aware of the activity.* And so 64-year-old Pearlie Rucker was evicted from her apartment because her mentally impaired daughter was caught with cocaine three blocks from their apartment, and Willie Lee and Barbara Hill, two elderly grandmothers, were evicted from their apartment because their grandsons were caught smoking pot in the parking lot.

A World Health Organization report ranked this nation's health care system 37th in the world, just after Costa Rica and just before Slovenia, and our newborn mortality rate ranks second-worst among developed nations. Why? Not because the quality of our medical practices and medical facilities is inferior, but because of the disparities in access to health care.

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These are things God cares about. Justice is something God expects of us. As the letter of James put it centuries later: *What God the Father considers to be pure and genuine religion is this: to take care of orphans and widows in their suffering and to keep oneself from being corrupted by the world.*

Religion is not just about us, about what God can do for us, about our need for comfort, courage, grace, strength. It is about those things, but not only about those things. If our religion does not include compassion and advocacy for the poor, if it does not lead to a passion for justice and an intolerance for injustice, then our religion simply is not genuine. Our Christian faith is about formation of character, about personal morality, about being nice, but it is also about being good, about being just, about being fair, both as individuals and as members of the communities of which we are a part.

Psalms 82 does have some harsh words for the people of God, but the psalm is not really about blame. It's about being honest and humble about our failures and our sins, and it's about putting our trust, putting our hope, in the right place.

I didn't read earlier the last verse of the psalm:

*Come, O God, and rule the world;
all the nations are yours .*

In the midst of a world that is filled with confusion and uncertainty we pray, *Come, O God, and rule the world!*

In the midst of a world that is filled with hatred and violence we pray, *Come, O God, and rule the world!*

In the midst of a world that is filled with unfairness and injustice we pray, *Come, O God, and rule the world!*

In the midst of a world where the best efforts of the best people is not enough we pray, *Come, O God, and rule the world!*

In the midst of a world where we long for peace we pray, *Come, O God, and rule the world!*

This is what we pray. This is what we pray every week! This is the what Jesus taught us to pray: *Thy kingdom come! ... Come, O God, and rule the world!* We pray for a regime change of divine dimensions!

May this be our prayer and our heart's desire, the one thing for which we hunger and thirst above everything else, the one thing for which we plan and work before everything else: *Come, O God, and rule the world!* Come, O God, and rule us.