

“Epiphany”
Stouffville United Church
Sunday, January 3, 2021

Psalm 72, Matthew 2 – Epiphany

“Give the king *your* justice, O God.” These opening words from Psalm 72 propelled me into thinking about the presence of justice in the world. And I wondered, “Would I find any traces of God’s vision for justice in the world around me today?”

Psalm 72 offers a vision of what the king’s justice will look like and feel like. Verse 4 is very much at the heart of the ‘job description’¹ of this king. “May he defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the needy, and crush the oppressor.” The word for justice in the Hebrew of the Old Testament is ‘mishpat’. A commentary helped to give me an understanding of its use in this psalm. “Mishpat is the term for God’s desired state of affairs. Mishpat is when the poorest are cared for. A society is just to the degree to which every person has enough and is lifted up. A king is measured not by hordes of chariots or the gold in the treasury, but by whether the cause of the poor was defended, whether the needy were delivered.”² This is what justice looks like to God – justice is an agency that works across all distinctions and boundaries, a presence that is more valuable than gold in the bank.

History has proven that no kingdom has ever managed to get this vision of justice right. The Old Testament is filled with prophets who condemn the track record of the kings, including David and his son Solomon, kings who did not dispense justice the way that Psalm 72 prescribed – to lift up the poor, to lift up the needy. In Psalm 72, the success of the leader is not measured by a book chronicling war conquests and treaties, or by coffers filled with treasure, or today by immaculate financial books, excellent profits, and impressive organizational charts. And yet, isn’t that what we’ve been about? About conquest, about control, about advantage, about politics, about winning?

What ever court justice we offer is relegated to dispensation through an overwhelmed court system, which in some parts of the world are corrupted by oppression and politics. Probably two thirds of our world are still asking, “Where is this King?” God’s justice? In our times? Where is it to be found? Where do we find, as the psalm says, justice “delivering the needy when they call, those who have no helper?” (vs 12)

Stephen Farris was the homiletics professor at Knox College in Toronto when I did my M Div. He wrote in his commentary on Psalm 72, “My own nation, Canada, got its formal name, Dominion of Canada, and its Latin motto, “A mari usque ad mare” (“from sea to sea”) from the King James Version of verse 8 of this psalm. “May he have dominion from sea to sea.” But the

¹ [Commentary on Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14 - Working Preacher from Luther Seminary](#), accessed Jan 1, 2021. Commentary for 2021, written by Beth Tanner.

² [Commentary on Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14 - Working Preacher from Luther Seminary](#), accessed Jan 1, 2021. Commentary for 2018, written by James Howell.

poor do not always find justice from their rulers in Canada either. And if we turn to the rulers of other nations, the picture stays the same.”³

Yesterday, the Toronto Star had a 3-page summary of “20 Indigenous stories that shaped 2020.”⁴ Some of these stories have been in past sermons of this year.

- The battle between Wet’suwet’en hereditary chiefs and Coastal Gas Link over access through its traditional lands.
- The violent arrest of Fort Chipewyan First Nation Chief Allan Adam in Fort McMurray over an expired licence plate.
- The 1492 Landback Land Occupation to protesting a housing project near Caledonia, Ontario, on illegally taken Six Nations land in the 1800s.
- Joyce Echaquan dying in a Quebec hospital after facing severe racism from staff.
- Mi’kmaq lobster fisherman facing violence from settler fishers.
- Barbara Kentner dying after being hit by a metal trailer hitch from a moving car, her killers finally sentenced.

A popular phrase about civilization that captures the essence of Psalm 72, says, “The test of a civilization is the way it cares for its helpless numbers.”⁵ Let’s use that as an assessment tool for today. The Covid-19 pandemic has shone a light on those places where the most vulnerable in our society are falling through the cracks. During this *second* wave of the pandemic, the Tendercare Living Center in Scarborough recently released the numbers of Covid related deaths amongst its residents. By December 23, 26 people had died. By December 28, the number was up to 43. On January 1, it’s 52. Today, it’s 60. Earlier in the week, the Ontario government said the home was ‘stable’.

*What did we not get right in our ‘care plan’ after the first devastating wave of the pandemic? That resulted in so many deaths in our care institutions? We failed our seniors who expected us to look after them. What didn’t we learn? What didn’t we ensure was implemented in terms of protocols and resources for the second wave which we knew was coming? What is at work in our society that makes us too comfortable where we are, that we don’t move out of our comfort zone and into a place that is uncomfortable to make noise, to challenge the system by saying **that’s not good enough.***

³ Feasting on the Word Commentary, Homiletical Perspective, 203.

⁴ [Toronto Star ePaper \(pressreader.com\)](https://www.pressreader.com/toronto-star) Saturday, January 2, 2021, Section A14 to A16. Accessed Jan 1, 2021.

⁵ [Commentary on Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14 - Working Preacher from Luther Seminary](#), accessed Jan 1, 2021.

Commentary for 2021, written by Beth Tanner.

I want to skip over for a moment to the Epiphany story in the Gospel of Matthew when the magi visit Baby Jesus in the manger in a stable in Bethlehem. William Herzog makes an interesting observation about the ‘staff’ in Herod’s palace. After King Herod hears that the magi have observed a star of a new born King of the Jews, he is frightened. He calls his priests and scribes together and asks them where the Messiah is to be born. And his staff say, “Oh, it’s in Bethlehem.” And they quote him the prophecy from Micah 5:2. Herzog comments that the scribes are pointing to “a town just a few miles away, but showed no interest in checking things out. They seemed unable to translate what they read into action. Once they answered Herod’s question, they were through and disappeared from the scene. They lived at the center of power. Who cared what was happening at the margins?”⁶

When we’re too ‘in the center’ we lose touch with what’s happening outside the center. And it deeply affects our sense of ‘agency’, our willingness to become ‘uncomfortable’ in order to seek justice. It would seem that staying at our comfort level enables injustice to dominate, but to *seek* justice asks us to become uncomfortable.

The Magi are travelling to pay homage to this new born king of the Jews. They enter in and on bended knee present their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Matthew then tells us that the magi were warned in a dream to go home a different way. It was as if in their hands they were given a new map. As a commentary noted, “Nothing is the same again [after you meet Jesus.] You don’t take the old road any longer. You unfold a new map and discover an alternate path.”⁷

This story of the magi coming to greet the new born King is about the arrival of the king that Psalm 72 points to. And Jesus lived that vision of God’s justice for us to see. This vision of justice clearly challenges our civilization’s social values, our economic platforms, our budget bottom lines, our organizational charts, our societal mindset, even our way of life.

Jesus did not come into my life to make me comfortable. But rather, Jesus came into my life to make me uncomfortable. Like the three wise men, once you’ve seen something so true that your soul cannot deny its presence, its power, its truth, you cannot find your way back by an old road. But you have been given a new road map, an alternate path. It’s yours to walk.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

⁶ Feasting on the Word Commentary, Exegetical Perspective, 217.

⁷ Feasting on the Word Commentary, Theological Perspective 216.