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Precious In His Sight
Sermon on Palm 72:1-7, 10-14
Epiphany Sunday, January 5, 2020

There's a scene in the movie *Mary Poppins*, where Mr. Banks is working on an advertisement for a new nanny, and his children, Jane and Michael, enter the room and say, "Here, father, we've already written one for you." And they begin to sing a song about "The Perfect Nanny," that goes something like this:

*If you want this choice position, have a cheery disposition
Rosy cheeks, no warts, play games, all sorts
You must be kind you must be witty, very sweet and fairly pretty
Take us on outings, give us treats, sing songs, bring sweets
Never be cross or cruel, never give us castor oil, or gruel
Love us as a son and daughter, and never smell of barley water
If you won't scold and dominate us, we will never give you cause to hate us
We won't touch your spectacles so you can't see, put toads in your bed or pepper in your tea
Hurry, nanny—many thanks, sincerely, Jane and Michael Banks*

And what we hear in their heartfelt little song is a yearning, a yearning for a particular kind of person to lead and guide them, and in similar way, Psalm 72 is about the yearning of the people for a particular kind of ruler.

I have preached on Epiphany Sunday many times, but I've never preached on Psalm 72 before and I know this because those pages are completely clean in my commentaries—no underlining, no coffee stains, nothing. I promised our musicians and Sunday School teachers I would stick with the lectionary this year. I'm going to explain what the lectionary is, because in visiting with family members and asking them what they thought it was, the most popular reply was: "Something you lecture from." And it's basically three one-year cycles of scripture readings, four readings for every Sunday. There's always a reading from the Old Testament, a reading from the New Testament, a Gospel reading, and a Psalm, though most churches just read

two in the interests of time. The idea is that people are exposed to a wider variety of scripture readings than if the preacher just preached on their favorite passages all the time. This year I'm trying to preach on some of the passages I've skipped over the years, like this one.

Back to Psalm 72 on this Epiphany Sunday in Year A . . . What kind of king inspires such awe and admiration that even other kings would come to give him gifts?

A king who delivers the needy when they call, the poor and those who have no helper. A king who has pity on the weak and the needy, and saves their lives, and redeems them from oppression and violence.

Scripture is very clear: the measure of greatness for a leader is their commitment to justice and compassion to those in need. A great leader is one who stands up for the little guy. A great leader makes the poor a priority, not an afterthought. Baby Jesus grows up and becomes the leader who teaches his followers that whenever they feed, clothe, visit, or care for someone in need, it's the same as doing it for him.

Today we don't long for a king, but we do long for great leaders. Each of us is called to be a leader in some way, in our own spheres. And churches, too, are called to lead. So this is a psalm not only for political leaders, but for all of us.

And I want to acknowledge that this is a church full of people who do already care deeply about those in need. I've watched you reach out with genuine warmth and friendliness to people who come in looking for a place to warm up, and watched you bring them hot coffee and donut holes. You bring food and supplies for the Blessing Box faster than we can fill it, you overflowed with generosity when we provided Christmas gifts for teens who aged out of foster care, you volunteer out in the community, you care for your aging loved ones, and some of you even have jobs where you help people in need all day long.

When you share your hopes and dreams for this congregation, the number one thing I hear is, “I want us to do more to help people in need.” And you get frustrated when you feel we aren’t moving fast enough, which is wonderful, because that means it really matters to you.

And yet, if you’re anything like me, it’s not always EASY. This week, I was struck by the words of verse 12: “For he delivers the needy when they call.” Can I just say, this one is hard for me. From time to time, I do get an actual phone call, and I usually deal with it by directing the caller to Doorstep. Doorstep is one of our ministry partners and they have the tools and training to assess and assist more effectively than I can.

But sometimes, the caller does not WANT to be directed to Doorstep, or says they’ve already tried Doorstep, and the Rescue Mission, and Let’s Help, and I have to decide how much of my time and attention I can afford to give to this caller, who is not connected with our church, and who may or may not be truthfully describing their situation. I feel terrible guilt about the assumptions I make, because pastors are supposed to care about everybody. And I feel relief when the call is over. Because, yes, it’s important to treat everyone like a child of God, but at some point the meeting has to start, and the report has to get written, and the emails have to be answered, and the sermon has to get done.

It’s not easy because while it’s one thing to agree that Christians have a mandate to share and to help those who are poor and in need, it’s another thing to agree on who deserves help, and how best to help them. The poor person we’d all love to help works two or more low-wage jobs to support their family, uses all their food stamps on broccoli, beans, tuna, milk and whole wheat bread, wouldn’t dream of blowing money on cigarettes, alcohol, or lottery tickets, goes to church, and somehow manages to keep their apartment clean and help out at their kids’ school while surviving on four hours of sleep at night. And of course, they’re humble, quiet, and

always grateful for what they receive. It's harder to want to help someone who's drunk, wasteful, loud, addicted, or angry. And maybe that's another reason this isn't easy, because being confronted with poverty and people who are poor and needy exposes our tendency to judge, our need to be appreciated, our conditional love and need for control and other stuff we'd rather not deal with. And yet another reason it's difficult is that sometimes we are the ones who feel poor and needy, and excluded from the prosperity and success that so many others seem to be enjoying while we ourselves are barely scraping by.

But the gift of Epiphany is the reality that Christ has truly broken down the barriers that divide us. The magi who make the long, dangerous journey to Bethlehem are not Jews but Gentiles who recognize the messiah as Lord and Savior. I've stressed before how the division between Jews and Gentiles was the biggest division anybody could imagine in those days, and how earth-shattering it was for the Apostle Paul to later write, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." Today we might add, "There is no longer rich, there is no longer middle class, there is no longer poor, for all of us are one in Christ Jesus."

I keep coming back to these verses: "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.*" That word "precious" puts a whole new spin on it.

And I believe God is calling us to sit with that for a while. To think about what it means to use compassion for the poor and those in need as the measure of a leader's greatness. To sit in holy discomfort and uncertainty. To keep discussing effective ways to help, and to do so respectfully even and especially when we passionately disagree with each other. To reflect on our own lives, our own choices, our own patterns of giving and spending in light of these words.

And to bow down, with the magi, and worship the one to whom all people are precious in his sight.