

Sitting in the Gap Study Guide – August 25, 2019

[Psalm 72:3-6, 12-14](#) & [Matthew 6:25-34](#)

(Click on scripture above to link directly to each passage in the *NRSV* on biblegateway.com.)

Note: These are NOT from the assigned texts for this week's lectionary, but were chosen thematically for our worship

Suggested Study / Prep

1. Read the passage(s) in several different translations and/or paraphrases (e.g. *NRSV* and *The Message*)
2. Read the provided commentary(s) below
3. Visit and explore some of the additional resources links (and/or explore your own commentaries, resources, etc)
4. Reflect on the provided questions
5. Generate your own questions and “wonderings”

Commentary on Psalm 72:1-7,10-14

(From *Homiletics*; “Richistanis”, January 6, 2008)

Psalm 72 is a prayer to God, expressed in sometimes hyperbolic language, to grant justice and wisdom to Israel's ruler, the king. Because of its central object of concern, it is classified as a royal psalm, and may have been used during an enthronement ceremony or the anniversary of such a ceremony. The psalm closes Book Two of the Psalter, which is identified as “the prayers of David son of Jesse” (v. 20; vv. 18-20 are a later editorial conclusion to the psalm, similar to that found at the end of Psalm 41). Although the existence and extent of a so-called “Davidic Psalter” is a matter of scholarly debate (see the discussion, for example, in C. A. Briggs, *The Book of Psalms* [The International Critical Commentary; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1907], vol. 1, lxi-lxv), the content of the psalms in Book Two of the Psalter is dominated by prayers, making the editorial conclusion thematically fitting if not necessarily historically precise. Today's lesson is taken from the opening verses of this prayer for a just ruler.

The psalm begins with a superscription, “Of Solomon,” which is attached to only two psalms, this one and Psalm 127. As with all the superscriptions of the psalms, this one is a later addition that found its way to this psalm based on the psalm's subject matter: the mention of a “king's son” and the request for wisdom (v. 1), the wide extent of the king's realm (v. 8), and the reference to a high level of material prosperity (vv. 3, 10). All of these references, as well as the reference to Sheba in verse 10 (see 1 Kings 10:1-13), seem most befitting the time of Solomon's rule, which was regarded in later Israelite historical writing as a kind of Golden Age.

The psalm opens with the plea, expressed either by a cantor, chorus or even the entire congregation, “Give the king your justice, O God” (v. 1), which is immediately paralleled in the second half of the verse with “and your righteousness to a king's son.” This is classic Hebrew poetic parallelism, found extensively throughout the poetic literature of the Hebrew Bible, especially in Psalms, some wisdom literature and the prophets. It is possible that the psalm was originally addressed not to God in general (*elohim* in Hebrew), but to the patron deity of Israel in particular, Yahweh, and that the more universal term for the deity was substituted by a later editor. There is evidence that the psalm has undergone significant editorial revision in various spots, and this was probably one of them.

The phrase “your justice” is only rarely applied to the deity, and exclusively in the Psalter, here and in Psalm 119:149, 156. God's justice is frequently referred to in the Hebrew Bible, of course (see, for example, Deuteronomy 33:21; 2 Chronicles 19:7; Job 8:3; 34:12; 37:23; Psalm 10:18; 33:5; 37:28; etc.), and divine justice was always understood by the writers of the Hebrew Bible to be the standard against which all human attempts at justice (or its perversion) were to be measured.

The Hebrew word translated “justice” is the plural form of the word “judgment,” and may denote the individual decisions required of the king (although this grammatical point ought not to be pressed too hard; a number of Hebrew plurals denote singulars with no evidence of plurality; cf. 2 Samuel 8:15; 15:1-6; 1 Kings 3:16-28). It was assumed that, as the Lord’s anointed, the king would render justice with divine assistance (Jeremiah 22:15-16).

The parallel term, righteousness (here and again in v. 2), contains no sense of the sort of moralizing or particularizing overtones that would distinguish it from justice; the two terms are semantically parallel in the theology of the Hebrew Bible, as shown in their frequent occurrences together in wisdom and prophetic literature (e.g., Psalm 33:5; 37:30; 94:15; Proverbs 1:3; 2:9; 8:20; Ecclesiastes 3:16; Isaiah 1:21, 27; 5:7, 16; Jeremiah 9:24; 22:3; and especially Psalms 89:14; 97:2; 99:4; and 106:3). There is no sense in the Hebrew Bible, as there is in post-Enlightenment Western cultures, of justice being based on universal natural law and righteousness being defined by special divine revelation. They are inextricable, and one is impossible without the other.

While justice and righteousness were expected of every faithful Israelite in all their dealings (see, e.g., Exodus 23:2; Leviticus 19:15; Deuteronomy 16:19; Isaiah 5:7), they were the particular responsibility of the king, who had, by virtue of his office, the power to ensure their enforcement (2 Samuel 8:15). And in the Hebrew Bible, the content of that justice and that righteousness was spelled out specifically as the protection of Israel’s most vulnerable, “the alien, the orphan, and the widow” (Deuteronomy 27:19; cf. also Jeremiah 7:6; 22:3; Ezekiel 22:7; Zechariah 7:10; Malachi 3:5; etc.). The protection of the latter two, in particular, became a trope in writings about kingship in the ancient Near East (see the use of the figure of the widow in the story concocted by Joab in 2 Samuel 14:5). In the Hebrew Bible, the protection of the widow and orphan was one of the defining characteristics of Yahweh (Psalm 68:5; 146:9), whose brand of justice is now sought for the earthly king.

In time, the righteousness demanded of the king was applied to the entire people of Israel, who were commanded to “seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow” (Isaiah 1:17), in imitation not of their earthly king, who was too easily subject to corruption, but of their divine heavenly ruler.

The limited vocabulary of the psalm’s poetry — the repetition of the words “righteousness” and “justice” in verse 2, arranged chiasmically with verse 1 — may point to a period of composition after the time of classical Hebrew poetry, when the sense of the poem would have been advanced, rather than simply repeated, in the second verse.

The expression “your poor,” referring to God’s poor, is found only here and at Psalm 74:19. Ordinarily, the poor would not be understood to be God’s but rather the people’s (as in Exodus 23:6 and in v. 4 below). The expression intimates the breakdown in Israelite social structure that gradually led to more and more subgroups within it being identified not with the chosen people, from whom they had been alienated or by whom they had been marginalized, but with Israel’s God. In time, this pattern would develop and coalesce around the idea of the “righteous remnant” (an expression that does not occur in exactly that form in the Hebrew Bible), the apogee of social outsiders and divine insiders.

The desire for the mountains and hills to “yield prosperity for the people . . . in righteousness” (v. 3) is not a new theme, but rather the elaboration of the theme of justice and righteousness already introduced. In the subsistence agrarian economy of ancient Israel, there was no sharp division between the moral world and the natural world; reality was a seamless whole. Human behavior had direct and often immediate consequences in the natural world, as the Deuteronomistic theologians reiterated throughout the Hebrew Bible: “If you heed these ordinances . . . the LORD your God will . . . love you, bless you, and multiply you; he will bless the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your ground, your grain and your wine and your oil, the increase of your cattle and the issue of your flock . . .” (Deuteronomy 7:12-13). A just ruler will reign over a fruitful land.

The NRSV reading in verse 5 — “May he live while the sun endures” — follows the Septuagint; the Hebrew reads “May they fear you” referring, presumably, to the oppressors of the poor and the needy mentioned (in the singular) in verse 4, which makes better sense. The text as it stands, unique to this psalm, is an example of poetic hyperbole (cf. Psalm 61:6; 89:36-37). How the king is to live “throughout all generations” is neither asked nor answered in the imagistic language of the psalm, but the wish, however implausible, is not out of place.

The rain falling “on the mown grass” in verse 6 would be urgently needed to mature crops after the clearing of weeds and before the onset of the summer drought. The verse continues the imagery of the fructifying monarch,

who brings bounty through righteousness.

The passage concludes with another reference to the longevity of the king's rule, desired "until the moon is no more" (v. 7), another image unique to this psalm.

Commentary on Matthew 6:24-34 (From *Homiletics*, "Add to Your Span", May 25, 2008)

The Sermon on the Mount in the gospel of Matthew is well known for its maxims, admonitions and teachings on a variety of subjects, including blessings, love of neighbor, prayer and the challenges of a life of discipleship. In the middle of this sermon, however, we find teachings of Jesus on money and its proper use. Previously, Matthew has narrated Jesus' teachings by using a motif of opposites or antitheses, for example, saying, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:43-44). By the halfway point of the sermon, however, these antitheses have become *polarities*. The polarity that occupies Matthew 6:19-34 concerns God on the one hand and money on the other. After describing this polarity (v. 24), Jesus explains it in more detail by talking about anxiety and worry. Understanding how money informs the passage about worry (vv. 25-34) will throw the two-part structure of the passage into greater relief, and will also attune the audience to echoes of other passages from the gospel of Matthew here.

Choosing between serving God and serving money is the most pointed polarity of this passage (v. 24). Apathy to a servant's master is not an option. Hatred and love, devotion and despising is the language used here. In a striking way, God and money are put on opposite sides of the spectrum of service. In the Greek text of Matthew, the final word of this verse is an Aramaic word, *mammon*, meaning wealth or money. For Greek readers of Matthew, the use of Aramaic may have had an intensifying effect. It calls for them to see money in a different light, showing the negative ways in which it could be a master. Given that God and money are the only choices, seeking the loyalty of those who will serve them, the remainder of this passage shows how one action that can occur daily — worry — places a person on one side of that spectrum or the other. By worrying, a disciple serves money and not God.

The transition between verses 24 and 25 can be translated either as "therefore" (NRSV) or "for this reason" (NASB). Both of these translations stress the connection between these two verses, as stated above. The question of "which master" a disciple serves is highlighted by the act of worrying. The next nine verses (vv. 25-33) are simply structured to highlight the pointlessness of one's worry and the provision of God. Almost every phrase is constructed to lift up the comparison between people, "you," and the object of "your" worry.

Jesus begins with a question of why one would worry about life, as defined by food and drink, and about one's body, as defined by clothes. Life is greater than food, and the body is greater than clothes (v. 25). This begins to show the re-evaluation of a life serving a different master: not material goods and money, but God (cf. vv. 19-21). These two comparisons are followed by a more extensive assessment of the "birds of the air," who do not lack food, though they do not sow, reap, harvest or store provisions (v.26). The point of the comparison is simple: If God can feed these birds, then God can feed "you." This argument from a minor point to a major point is common in Greco-Roman rhetoric, and it is repeated in this section of the Sermon on the Mount (cf. vv. 28, 30, 32). The final phrase of this section, "Are you not of more value than they?" (v. 26; cf. Matthew 10:31), may sound presumptuous or simplistic. It should be read as neither, but it is rather a way to reinforce this comparison from the lesser to the greater and to show God's care for all creatures, humans included.

After these three comparisons (life more than food, body more than clothes, people more than birds of the air), the pattern of comparisons interrupts itself, asking "And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?" (v. 27). As the NRSV text note says, this verse can also be translated, "Can any of you by worrying add one cubit to your height?" The issue is that nothing can be achieved by worrying. The hyperbole of the situation, adding time or height to a person, is used to show that the control over life, over food, over clothes and over money that humans think they have is entirely an illusion (cf. the introduction to this passage in Luke 12:13-21).

This same question of control is reiterated in the next three comparisons. First, the lilies of the field are compared, favorably, to Solomon, as they exceeded even Solomon's glory (v. 28). Thus, God not only provides the minimum for creation, God also can provide more than the wealthiest, most glorified monarch can (cf. 1 Kings 10 for descriptions of Solomon's wealth). Money cannot compete with the glory of creation, which does not even work (toil or spin) to produce its beauty; beauty is a gift from God.

The second comparison of these three is intentionally parallel to the first. Not only is nature more beautiful than clothing that money can buy, nature's beauty is even fleeting, "alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven" (v. 30). This produces another argument from the lesser to the greater, as humans, fortunately, experience greater longevity than the grass of the field. Therefore, they have no reason to doubt that God will care for them as well. Even so, the accusation at the end of this verse, "you of little faith," raises doubts for the audience. This phrase (ολιγοπιστος) is often used by Matthew to describe the actions of the disciples. After he calms a storm, Jesus asked his disciples, "Why are you afraid, you of little faith" (Matthew 8:26) and continues to describe the doubt or questioning of the disciples in this manner (cf. 14:31; 16:8). Ολιγοπιστος is where fear and doubt meet faith. The doubts of the disciples, and the doubts of those who heard these words of Jesus may register as fear. After all, the words of this passage do not make sense on the surface. How can Jesus compare humans to birds, lilies and grass? If humans did not work, how would they eat, drink or wear clothes? (6:31; cf. 6:25).

Jesus then says that the "Gentiles" seek after "all these things" (v. 32). This statement may have less of a basis in what the Gentiles actually did with their time and more of a function of what boundaries needed to be drawn around the community. In order to "serve God" (v. 24), this community could not seek after the things which would serve Mammon (money) (v.24). Yet, they were also not to become ascetics. Instead, "your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things" (v. 32). The question is not whether food, drink and clothing are important, but rather who is entrusted with providing these things. Unflinchingly, Jesus exhorts his listeners to seek first "the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well" (v. 33). The "giving" of these things in verse 33 is the same word as the potential "adding" of height or time to one's life (v. 27). Thus, what is impossible for humans in this discussion can be accomplished by God, who gives "all things."

This passage walks a fine line between apathy and perfectionism, and between living in and out of this world. Instead of declaring that material goods do not matter, Jesus proclaims that one should see God, the Master, as the who can provide the "things" that are necessary (for an extension of this idea, see Matthew 25:31-46, where the focus has shifted from receiving "things" to giving these "things" to others). Rather than exhorting people to withdraw from the world as ascetics, God "knows" that these things are essential for survival, but they are only secondary to seeking God's kingdom and righteousness (cf. Matthew 7:7). In this way, Jesus transforms our vision of both money and God, in order that we, rightly seeing, may rightly serve.

Additional Resources

- [The Text this Week](#) – a huge archive of commentaries, blogs, sermons, etc. Note – this site collects resources related to ALL of the lectionary texts for a given week...not all will relate to the passage(s) being studied, but many will. You will have to sift and search for these texts!
- Check out other commentaries available for these texts (and others!) at [WorkingPreacher.org](#).

Reflection Questions on Psalm 72:3-6, 12-14:

1. About whom is this Psalm speaking? (Hint: You may want to read the surrounding verses!) Is the subject of these words important? Does it have something to say to the rest of us, or are we merely invited to join in the petition?
2. In what ways do the concepts of power and privilege play out in this Psalm? Where do you see yourself in such a matrix?
3. How would you modernize the petitions and blessings of this Psalm if you were tasked with rewriting it in a contemporary context?

Reflection Questions on Matthew 6:25-34:

1. About what do you worry? If Jesus were speaking such words directly to you, what would fill in the blanks (“do not worry about_____ ; why do you worry about_____”)?
2. A repeat from 8/11... Saying that we should not worry and actually letting go of the anxieties and fears that so often dominate our daily living are two very different things. So the real question is more likely not whether or not we should worry or even whether we will worry, but rather *how* we shall navigate our way beyond these worries to the trust in God and letting go of our felt need to control the fulfillment of our needs and desires that Jesus advocates? What are some strategies or practices that can help us nurture and develop our capacity to have faith to live beyond our worries?
3. Another repeat...Richard Beaton, *workingpreacher.org* (May 25, 2008) offers this food for thought: “As Ulrich Luz has put it, when interpreted in a superficial manner, this statement could only have been written by a single guy living a carefree life on the beach in sunny Galilee. The implication of Jesus’ message here is that much of what matters to us today, the material aspects of our lives, ought not to be taken seriously and can be completely entrusted to a God who cares for us....that one does not need to work or prepare for the future at all; we can simply relax knowing that God will take care of our needs. But as most of us know, this does not seem to match what we know of life on this planet.... does this mean that the pursuit of wealth through hard work and investment is wrong? Or that people should not enjoy the fruit of their labor? One would be forgiven for thinking that this is a passage for the truly devoted disciples, the original twelve who followed Jesus, or for missionaries in today’s world, but not for those of us in the real world.” So how shall we live in regards to this text? Is it something aspirational? A challenge for the spiritually elite? A mandate for all disciples? Are those of us who choose to live and work and raise our families in the “real world” in necessary opposition to the kingdom of God?

What questions do you have?

What do you “wonder” about when reading these passages?