

Psalm 121

I raise my eyes toward the mountains.

Where will my help come from?

2 My help comes from the Lord,
the maker of heaven and earth.

3 God won't let your foot slip.
Your protector won't fall asleep on the job.

4 No! Israel's protector
never sleeps or rests!

5 The Lord is your protector;
the Lord is your shade right beside you.

6 The sun won't strike you during the day;
neither will the moon at night.

7 The Lord will protect you from all evil;
God will protect your very life.[a]

8 The Lord will protect you on your journeys—
whether going or coming—
from now until forever from now.

Luke 18

Jesus was telling them a parable about their need to pray continuously and not to be discouraged. 2 He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected people. 3 In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him, asking, 'Give me justice in this case against my adversary.' 4 For a while he refused but finally said to himself, I don't fear God or respect people, 5 but I will give this widow justice because she keeps bothering me. Otherwise, there will be no end to her coming here and embarrassing me."

6 The Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. 7 Won't God provide justice to his chosen people who cry out to him day and night? Will he be slow to help them? 8 I tell you, he will give them justice quickly. But when the Human One[a] comes, will he find faithfulness on earth?"

Sermon

Grace to you and peace from God our Creator, our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit: Amen.

I must confess that I began this sermon while watching last Sunday night's presidential debate. With candidates yelling at and over one another, ignoring the questions of the moderators, and playing to the passions of the crowd, I felt almost certain that the unjust judge from Luke 18 was running for president and may have been the nominee of both parties.

Seriously. Think about this. Each candidate is playing to the pleas of crowds, yammering for their attention, for their political equity, for their administration of so-called justice. Of course this is nothing new, but this year, it seems they've turned it up to eleven on the pandering meter. Hillary's approach to college, taxation, and healthcare changed drastically because she wanted to garner the votes of

Bernie Sanders' supporters. Trump's gone from a non-practicing Presbyterian to claiming evangelical tendencies to procure the conservative Christian vote. Every time someone comes to their bench and cries for justice, or at least for preferential treatment, these unjust judges seem to do anything and everything to earn the favor of the people seeking favors.

And let's be honest. That's tempting for all of us, too. We want a friend in high places, who makes laws that favor us or our ideals, who will defend us even if we're wrong, who will play to our fears and secure our holdings. We raise our eyes toward the hills where someone, anyone, who will tell us sweet little lies like, "you're right" and "you never have to change." But after that debate – or was it a debacle – something tells me that we're looking to the wrong places for help.

“I raise my eyes toward the mountains. Where will my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth... The Lord will protect you on your journeys—whether going or coming—from now until forever from now.” If only we could elect Jesus for president. Now that sounds like someone worth talking to, someone to seek out, someone to pray to. Is it too late for some minor third party to nominate Jesus for president? Although, Jesus denied those who tried to make him king of Israel, so I’m guessing he’s got no deep desire to lead our country, either.

But the point of this parable isn’t that God is like a worldly leader; rather, it’s that God’s so desperately unlike our worldly leaders. If even the most corrupt of people in power will eventually give you a morsel of their attention or assistance, how much more with the God who created you attend to your needs? How much more will a benevolent God bend an ear to those in need than the corrupt

figureheads at the helms of our depressing political systems?
We plea over and over again with the unjust judges of the world,
who rarely hear us and offer justice almost as a mistake, but
God, who listens to every prayer we offer, exudes justice
from every divine pore.

A more fundamental question, then, seems to be this:
Why do we raise our eyes to Capitol Hill when only Mount
Zion may offer us the words of life we so desperately need?
Perhaps it's because nothing in that psalm suggests that
we'll get just what we ask for. Nowhere in this Psalm do we
hear that, "God will give you just what you want." Of
course, that's probably because we're so often quite
temperamental in the things that we ask for. At various
points in my life, I've lusted after some ridiculous stuff – a
Tom Clancy video game when I already had a bunch of
games, a particular G.I. Joe vehicle when I had drawers full
of action figures, a new guitar when I've only got two arms

and already four instruments – but wouldn't you know it, once I got them, life didn't really change. I quickly got bored of them and moved on to a Lego set or some golf clubs or a drumset. But, you see, that's not the stuff that God wants to give us. God's not interested in giving us things that don't transform us. God only gives us things that change us for the good.

That's why we often tend to turn to other sources. We beg of politicians for favors, for sure, but all too often they're not favors that transform. They're favors that keep the status quo. Our prayer to them is that they allow us to stay in our comfortable bubbles, that they foster only cosmetic change so that we might avoid the real transformation that require stretching ourselves, moving beyond our comfort zones, actually admitting we need God. We plea to the unjust judges of the world because, well, they'll eventually

answer our pleas, even and especially when what we ask for isn't what's actually best for us.

But what's at the core of this parable in particular is not some silly toy or selfish silliness. What this woman wants, and what God's talking about here, is justice. Think about how the judge's name sets him up: he's an unjust judge. It's not in his identity to offer justice, not his tendency to execute justice. His very core is defined as anti-justice. The only reason that the widow receives justice is because she's annoyed the judge and he's done with her pestilence. He doesn't want justice as an end. He only wants to be left alone, so justice becomes a tool in his hands to accomplish his selfish ends.

Part of what the parable is saying is that this is so clearly not God. This isn't how God operates, because God doesn't give justice just to silence our complaints. God's name isn't unjust judge. This play on names is central to the parable

because most Jews in Jesus's time would know many of God's names and they would know that unjust judge is the furthest thing from God's identity.

There were many names for God in the Hebrew Bible and most are quite descriptive of God's behavior, identity, or presence. We get names like YHWH Jireh, the Lord provides. We get names like YHWH Shalom, the Lord is peace. We get names like YHWH Rapha, the Lord heals. We get names like El Roi, the God who sees. Jesus, with this parable, is pointing out something quite simple and simply profound. We name people what we expect of them. Unjust judges, for the most part, are unjust, and are only tempted toward justice when it serves their selfish desires. Our God, however, is a God who provides for us, who brings us peace, who heals our every ill, who sees us long before we look to God for assistance. This is our God, and the names of our God remind us that our prayers won't go

unheard, that our pleas fall upon the ears of one who's already promised to bring us justice. One of the Hebrew names that is referenced less often in English speaking contexts is YHWH Tsidkenu, the Lord our righteousness. Why would we pray to the unjust judges when the Lord our righteousness stands ready to hear us and administer justice?

So, Jesus says, when we pray to God for true justice, rather than complaining to an unjust judge, we're bringing our desire for righteousness to the one who is righteousness itself. We can expect God to work for the good for all those that love God. We can expect that God will work for the reconciliation of all things in Christ Jesus. We can pray with a certainty that, even before we seek justice, God's very identity is at work bending the arch of history toward reconciliation.

In one sense, it's easy for us to then understand why some prayers seem to go unanswered. God's really not interested in making us all rich, so our prayers for mansions and Maseratis will continue to be low on the list of God's priorities. Even my propensity for musical instruments probably isn't particularly close to God's heart. And you know what? That's a good thing. That's a great thing. God should be about justice and not just stuff.

It gets harder, though, when we consider our prayers around the untimely deaths of young people, around ending racial, sexual, and gender prejudice, around ending payday loan scams, around caring for the number of children in need of foster care and adoption, and a host of other things that so clearly scream of injustice to our world. Despite what the parable says, we certainly don't feel like that justice comes quickly, or at least not quickly enough for my tastes.

Maybe, though, there's a difference between justice and restoration. Restoration would mean a return to the period before injustice occurred, but once an injustice occurs, the past can no longer be retrieved. There's a benchmark in our history that's changed our lives. Perhaps justice is the return of dignity to someone whose dignity has been challenged by injustice. Perhaps justice is making a new way for abundant life rather than returning to the old ways forever changed by the entrance of sin into the world.

For instance, if we're looking for payday loans to end tomorrow, that likely won't happen. But we're also seeing faith-based microlending practices arise that provide small amounts of cash at reasonable rates to those in need, even as there's also advocacy work happening to end these predatory schemes that prey on the most vulnerable amongst us. That seems like justice in the face of injustice. While there's enough evidence of white male privilege in

our own denomination to make the injustice still quite clear, we've got evidence of justice growing, with a female presiding bishop, a gay director for worship, and a black vice president of the churchwide council. There's evidence of justice in the face of injustice. I don't mean to explain this away. We must continue to pray to and work alongside God to end the debt spirals caused by payday lenders. We must pray to and work alongside God to raise up oppressed peoples who carry God's image. I suppose what I'm trying to do highlight the presence of God already at work answering our prayers for justice, not to say that God's work is done, but to say that God's at work, even if it doesn't seem like it at first glance.

Our God is not some unjust judge. Instead, the Lord is our righteousness. We can trust that our prayers for justice are heard and that God is already at work for justice in the world. Alongside that trust, we must also look for that justice

already happening in the world, even if it's not the vision we had in mind. Amen.