

**Sermon: January 8, 2023. Psalm 72: 1-14. Preached in Canmore, AB.
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church – Rev Greg Wooley.**

When I was a teenager, one of my favourite board games was a Parker Brothers' game named CAREERS, a Christmas gift received in about 1973. The gameplay had you going around the playing board and ducking into various career paths, from which you could garner points or dollars relating to fame, fortune and happiness. Whoever got to 60 points first would win the game. But it wasn't quite that straight forward.

One of my favourite parts of this game, is that at the beginning of the game each player, secretly, writes down their personal formula: it could be 20 fame points, 20 happiness points, and 20 thousand dollars of fortune, or it could be 10 thousand dollars, no fame, and 50 happiness points – it was up to you, so long as the total added up to 60 points. If your career path turned out differently – say, you ended up with way more fame than you had bargained for but way less fortune – well, too bad, if it didn't fit the configuration you stated at the start, you hadn't reached your goal and you hadn't won.

Not too surprisingly, actual life paths don't work quite like that, though there are times that it all seems as random as a roll of the dice in a board game. But what caught my attention as 13 year old, was the notion that success – at least as described by these three factors - is a variable thing: not everyone wants the same combination of fame, fortune and happiness.

Our reading this morning is from the 72nd Psalm, a Psalm with high hopes of fame, fortune and happiness for a Monarch and the people. Seminary professor Kenneth Way describes the original function of the Psalm like so: "Psalm 72 is probably a coronation prayer that was used when one Davidic king dies and the new one comes to power, likely used for inauguration ceremonies." He continues, "The first word in the Hebrew text of verse 1 simply translates as 'Of Solomon.' Perhaps this means Solomon wrote the Psalm, but it might also mean that it was commissioned by him or it was just written with him in mind. We could just say that it marks the psalm as "Solomonic" in some way...capturing the idyllic themes of Solomon's reign."

So if we think of this Psalm as originally written for a specific and formal occasion – the transition of a monarchy, which many of us experienced for the first time last year with the death of Queen Elizabeth II and the ascendancy of King Charles III – it's interesting to see what comes next. What combination of fame, fortune and happiness was expressed by Psalm 72? Or, assuming that this prayer hopes for all these things without limitation for the new ruler, what does it envision as a "successful" rule for the new monarch, emulating in some way the rule of King Solomon? The answer might be a bit unexpected.

The first four verses of the Psalm go like so:

Give the king your justice, O God, and your righteousness to a king's son.

² May he judge your people with righteousness and your poor with justice.

³ May the mountains yield prosperity for the people, and the hills, in righteousness.

⁴ May he defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the needy, and crush the oppressor.

The initial focus here, is a pairing of justice and righteousness, with repeated admonitions that the poor must be defended and treated justly, including a very pointed reference to delivering the needy and crushing those who would oppress them. The repeating of this within a coronation prayer seems to suggest that some rulers were less concerned about these things than others, doesn't it? Interesting that the more things change, the more they stay the same.

After praying that the people of the land, especially those in greatest need, will be ruled by one who is himself governed by justice and righteousness, in the next three verses, the angle of approach changes somewhat, focusing more on the personal well-being of the new ruler:

⁵ May he live while the sun endures and as long as the moon, throughout all generations.

⁶ May he be like rain that falls on the mown grass, like showers that water the earth.

⁷ In his days may righteousness flourish and peace abound, until the moon is no more.

Again, it's all rooted in righteousness, and the hopes are for peace and long life.

The next four verses, which I'll put on-screen but not read aloud are quite nationalistic.

⁸ May he have dominion from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth.

⁹ May his foes^[b] bow down before him, and his enemies lick the dust.

*¹⁰ May the kings of Tarshish and of the isles render him tribute;
may the kings of Sheba and Seba bring gifts.*

¹¹ May all kings fall down before him, all nations give him service.

Words like "have dominion from sea to sea" are words one might well expect at a coronation, but it is the kind of thought and language that has led to so many wars, and so much damage to Indigenous peoples over the millennia. One bit I would lift out of this, still nationalistic but shaped a bit differently, is the reference to the Kings of Tarshish, Sheba, Seba and the isles bringing tribute gifts to the new King -- which, if worded in proper metre, would fit nicely enough as a verse of "We Three Kings" or "The First Nowell" in our Epiphany celebration today.

Then, the final three verses of today's passage have much the same tenor as the first four:

¹² For he delivers the needy when they call, the poor and those who have no helper.

¹³ He has pity on the weak and the needy and saves the lives of the needy.

¹⁴ From oppression and violence he redeems their life, and precious is their blood in his sight.

The focus returns to the needy, those regarded as poor, weak, alone, oppressed, targeted, and the King is portrayed as a sort of Papa Bear figure: "precious is their blood in his sight."

And while not formally part of today's reading, if we continue on in this Psalm there's lots of talk of fame, fortune and happiness, and credit is given to God for any and every good thing that will happen during the new King's reign... and verse 16 is so lovely I just need to put it on screen:

*¹⁶ May there be abundance of grain in the land; may it wave on the tops of the mountains;
may its fruit be like Lebanon; and may people blossom in the cities like the grass of the field.*

So if we take all of these elements of this coronation prayer, all those hopes and expectations for the new King and his subjects, how does this overlay our world? It certainly speaks to the reign of King Charles III and the hopes we may have for him, especially with his Coronation coming up on May 6th, but in general, it reaches beyond that to the hopes and expectations we have for our elected leaders. And if we are to take it one more step and go beyond our elected leaders, to those we lift up as important people because of their visibility, their popularity, their levels of fame and fortune, is there a corrective here?

Now, those who know me well may be surprised that we are already half an hour into the first in-person service in 2023 and I have not yet referenced baseball, not even once; well, friends, your wait is over. Baseball is now in its off-season, and as much as I love this game some

ridiculously lucrative contracts are being signed, with 13 players just this past month signing contracts worth more than \$20 million per season. When one pitcher signed for \$43M per season, I did a quick calculation and, based on the average person taking 22,000 breaths in a day \$43M in a year is like getting paid \$5 each time he draws a breath.

And in order to make clear that baseball is not the sole culprit on this, a story on CBC.ca on January 3rd - I repeat, January 3rd - proclaimed that "By 9:43 a.m., Canada's richest CEOs have already earned the average worker's annual salary." The reporter, Jenna Benchetrit, quotes a report by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA) which states that the 100 best-paid chief executive officers in Canada now make 243 times what the typical worker earns.

Yes, my "envy" button does get pushed when I read stuff like this, but more than that it is a significant indictment on our inability in the northern hemisphere to hear the good counsel offered some three millennia ago, when the people of Israel gathered to anoint a new King. The success and legacy of a new King would be determined by his ability to notice the needs of the poorest of the poor and do something about it. Monarchs were to be judged by the size of their heart – their compassion for the people - not the size of their treasury or their stockpile of weaponry. And while yes, the opulence of Solomon's Temple scored extra marks for him in the hearts and minds of the people and was a significant source of national pride, I come back to that beautiful line in verse 16, longing for a land where the people will "blossom like the grass of the field" –their happiness will flourish because they live in a land that is just... where those on the margins are welcomed in... where those who did not have enough, now do have enough.

We live, at the start of 2023, in a world of great inequality and inequity. We live in a world where many of the most famous and popular leaders are the most bombastic. We live in a world of influencers, both famous and infamous, often so absorbed with how many followers they have or how blatantly luxurious their lifestyle is, that the lives of those who struggle escape their notice. And make no mistake about it, any one of us can have our heads turned by such things, as well.

It may not be a full-on "new year's resolution", but this would be a good time to do some thinking about what matters most to us. As we look at Canada, as we look at Banff and Canmore and surrounding communities, what would "successful" look like? Famous? Wealthy? Or Just? Equitable? Supportive? Inclusive? What would be needed, for happiness and that first-Sunday-of-Advent word, "contentment" to be experienced, starting with those who have the least?

I leave you with those questions, to be answered by the way we conduct ourselves as a congregation, by the expectations we have of ourselves and our economic leaders and our elected leaders, by the efforts we make toward a peaceful world founded in justice, as we live out this year together.

Oh, and this: if any of you want your own copy of CAREERS, check out the Rundle Thrift shop in Banff – I donated my well-worn 1970s copy a bit before Christmas, it may still be there!

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