

Adult Teaching Resources

January 6, 2019



Epiphany (January 6-March 3)

What Are We Praying For?

Psalm 72 (RCL 1-7, 10-14) – “A Prayer for Justice”

Psalm 29 – “A Prayer for Peace”

Psalm 36 (RCL 5-10) – “A Prayer for Love”

Psalm 19 – “A Prayer for Goodness”

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A Prayer for Justice

Psalm 72 (RCL 1-7, 10-14)

FIT Teaching Guide

by David Woody

This adult teaching outline is designed to support THE BIBLE LESSON by Tony Cartlege, printed in *Nurturing Faith Journal*. You can subscribe to either the digital or print edition of *Nurturing Faith Journal* to access the lessons. Please also ensure that each person in your class has a copy of *Nurturing Faith Journal* so they can prepare before the lesson.

Bible Background

“May he judge your people with righteousness, and your poor with justice.” Psalm 72:2

Today, we observe Epiphany, the day reserved for the three wise men, or in the words of the popular carol, the Three Kings. Jesus’ birth represented the coming of a new king, one the magi wanted to see and honor with gifts.

Israel waited a long time for a king who would bring power and might against Roman rule. They waited and prayed. Their prayers, recorded in a psalm for an earthly king, speak of a reign for a king who would bring power and might against Roman rule. Today, we explore that psalm where God is king and justice reigns.

Opening

After everyone arrives, welcome them to class and to the New Year. Move to the board or large sheet of paper at the front of the room. On the left side of the paper, label at the top “King/Ruler” and on the right side, label “Jesus.”

Ask your class to think about everything they know about kings and rulers and make a list of their thoughts. For example, “powerful, family lineage, palace/castle, cunning” might come to mind. Record all the answers.

Then, do the same exercise for Jesus—record everything they know about Jesus.

After both lists have been written, step back and ask your class to compare and contrast the lists.

What do both lists have in common?

Where do they differ?

If you lived during the time when Jesus was born, which list would you prefer to see in a leader? Why do you say that?

What do you desire in a leader today? How much of that is king-based and how much is Jesus-based?

Reading the Bible

What does the psalmist ask for the king? (justice and righteousness)

What is the hope of the king's judging? (he would judge people with righteousness and the poor with justice)

What is the hope for how to treat the poor and needy? (defend the cause of the poor and give deliverance to the needy)

What is the hope for the king's life? (vv5-8)

What is the hope for the king's relationship with his foes? (vv9-11)

How will he treat the poor and needy? (vv12-14)

What is the hope for the king's land and people? (an abundance of grain, people might blossom in the cities)

What is the hope for the king? (his name endures forever, all nations be blessed by him)

Making Connections

As a person of faith, what do you think is the best way to intercede for his/her country? How would you do it?

Our Lesson Writer defines the Hebrew word for justice...is *mishpat*, which has to do with making right and fair decisions, especially in legal matters." Who do you want making those decisions in your life and community? Who actually makes those decisions?

Our Lesson Writer defines righteousness as "to right doing in every sense: spiritual, social, and moral – right doing that grows from a right relationship with God and others." How do you define righteousness? How do you serve righteousness in your life?

In your opinion, what is the true measure of a leader (king)? Who best embodies that ideal for you?

How does your city protect the poor? How does your community protect the poor? How does your church protect the poor?

How long should a leader reign? Should the rules be different for a good (or bad) leader? Why do you say that?

Our Lesson Writer says, "Power alone does not make a great king, however: the ideal leader is one who "delivers the needy when they call, the poor and those who have no helper." Such a king "has pity on the weak and the needy" and saves their lives, for "precious is their blood in his sight" (vv. 12-14). A truly good leader has concern for all people." What do you say makes a good leader?

So What?

This passage presents an interesting opportunity for conversation. We live in a society that selects and elects its leaders. We don't have a royal line with a king or queen.

In the large group, discuss the idea of living under a kingship.

What do you think are the benefits of living under a king?

What do you think are the detriments of living under a king?

Describe the freedoms you would have with a king.

How would justice and righteousness work in a kingdom? Is that better or worse than what we have now?

How is living a faithful life like living with a king?

The Challenge

This week, dispense justice and righteousness as Christ would. Treat others with love, respect, and fairness.

Prayer

Loving God, as we begin a New Year, help us to follow you and serve you with unwavering devotion. May we treat others with the love and grace you freely give to us. Amen.

Digging Deeper

by Tony Cartlege

Digging Deeper is designed to support THE BIBLE LESSON by Tony Cartlege, printed in *Nurturing Faith Journal*. Watch for the “shovel” icon in the THE BIBLE LESSON, and then reference that item in this Digging Deeper resource. You can subscribe to either the digital or print edition of *Nurturing Faith Journal* to access the lessons. Please also ensure that each person in your class has a copy of *Nurturing Faith Journal* so they can prepare before the lesson.

The text—The Revised Common Lectionary uses only vv. 1-7 and 10-14 for the liturgical readings. For Bible study, it works better to consider the entire psalm.

A king’s son—The superscription of Psalm 72 reflects a tradition that this psalm was written for Solomon’s coronation, but the psalm itself is written so it could be used for any coronation. The psalmist prays that God will inspire divine righteousness in “a king’s son” – more literally, “a son of a king.” Solomon, of course, was King David’s son, beginning a dynasty of Davidic scions that lasted throughout Judah’s history.

The king as judge—The role of a good king as judge is illustrated by several biblical stories. The classic example is the story of two prostitutes who brought their case to King Solomon after one of them accidentally smothered her baby while sleeping, and claimed that the other woman’s child was her own. Solomon famously declared that the living child should be sliced in half and divided between them, revealing the true mother when she cried out against the idea (1 Kings 3:16-28).

Another story relates Joab’s ploy to get David to allow Absalom to return home by arranging for a skilled actress to play the part of a bereaved mother seeking protection for her living son, who had killed his brother (2 Samuel 14). The devious Absalom later stirred up sentiment against his father by claiming that David’s administration offered no recourse for justice (2 Sam. 15:1-7).

Jesus’s mission—Jesus began his ministry by declaring his interest in bringing justice to the poor. In Nazareth’s synagogue, he quoted from Isaiah 61:1, declaring that he had come to bring good news to the poor and to set free the downtrodden (Luke 4:18-19). How does Jesus model the ideal king as described in Ps. 72:1-4? How does the challenge of Matt. 25:40 extend this calling to every child of the King?

Same old, same old—Can you think of any political leaders who have shown a special interest in helping the poor? It’s no secret that political systems tend to be dominated by those who have the most money, promoting policies that favor the wealthy rather than using resources to lift up the poor.

Would the psalmist think of America’s current leadership as an answer to prayer?

Digging Deeper *continued*

A fitting doxology—The last two verses of Psalm 72 may have been added as a conclusion, not only for the psalm, but to serve as an appropriate benediction marking the end of “Book II” of Psalms (42-72). This section is often called the “Elohistic Psalter” because God is frequently (though not exclusively) called “Elohim” in these chapters. “Book II” may have originally circulated as an independent collection, later integrated into the main body of the psalms. Just as Psalm 150 serves as a benediction for the entire compilation, so these two verses bring the Elohistic Psalter to a fitting close. And, they are not entirely unrelated to the psalm in which they appear. They declare that Yahweh alone is Israel’s true king, the only one whose glory can fill the earth and outlive the sun.

Praying, and voting—People who live under a ruling monarchy have no input into who their next king will be. Americans have never had any liking for a king, but we do have leaders who exercise the same kind of power. While the psalmist could only pray for a just ruler, we have the opportunity to vote for leaders who are concerned with justice for all.

What qualities should we look for in our leaders as we not only pray for them, but vote?

The Hardest Question

by Tony Cartlege

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Why so many psalms about kings?

Given the image of Christ as king, it is not surprising that the psalm text for Epiphany this year is from one of the “Royal Psalms,” and is designed as a prayer for a just king.

At least eleven psalms may be classified as Royal Psalms, and all of them relate to the rule of David and his dynasty in Jerusalem (2, 18, 20, 21, 45, 72, 89, 101, 110, 132, 144). Psalm 72 was probably composed for us in coronation festivities when a new king ascended the throne. An old tradition, reflected in the superscription, suggests that the king was Solomon, perhaps because of the psalm’s emphasis on wise justice. Some traditions even hold that the prayer was written by David for Solomon.

But why do we have so many psalms about kings? The northern kingdom of Israel was destroyed by the Assyrians around 722 BCE, and there were no more kings. The southern kingdom of Judah was defeated by the Babylonians in 587 BCE, bringing kingship to an end in Jerusalem. After the exile, Hebrews were allowed to return to Jerusalem, but ruled by a Persian-appointed governor, not a king.

Still, psalms about kingship and prayers for a just king remained popular long after Israel and Judah had a king, or any hope for one in the near future. Indeed, the Royal Psalms not only persist, but some of them occupy strategic places in the psalter. The second psalm in the collection, following the introductory wisdom psalm, celebrates the king’s enthronement. Psalm 72 concludes “Book 2” of the five collections making up the psalms with a prayer for a king who embodied justice. Similarly, Psalm 89 – a royal psalm that laments the loss of the monarchy – closes “Book 3” (the five divisions are 1-41, 42-72, 73-89, 90-106, and 107-150). The last of the royal psalms, Psalm 144, seems to transfer the responsibilities of the king to the people as a whole.

Thus, while the Royal Psalms recall Israel’s kings with fondness, the kings were representatives of the people, and all were called to bring God’s will to bear on earth through lives characterized by justice, righteousness, and the state of peace and prosperity embodied in the word *shalom*.

These qualities, of course, are at the heart of Psalm 72, which recognizes that true justice, righteousness, and peaceful prosperity can only occur when the poor are empowered and included as equal citizens. The prophets consistently criticized both kings and people for falling short of God’s ideal, but the lasting hope for a just, righteous, and prosperous society remained.

The Hardest Question *continued*

Considering these things reminds Christians that we serve the eternal King, who desires that we be the very agents of divine love and justice. Over and over, Jesus not only showed compassion for the poorest and neediest of the land, but instructed his followers to do the same.

If we would desire a just, righteous, and peacefully prosperous nation, we must go beyond praying for and voting for good leaders: the work of justice belongs to all of us.