

ENDURES ALL THINGS

A Sermon on Psalm 82—Rev. Adam E. Eckhart

July 10, 2016—First United Church of Christ (Congregational), Milford, CT

SCRIPTURE READING: Psalm 82

God has taken his place in the divine council;

in the midst of the gods he holds judgment:

“How long will you judge unjustly

and show partiality to the wicked? Selah

Give justice to the weak and the orphan;

maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute.

Rescue the weak and the needy;

deliver them from the hand of the wicked.”

They have neither knowledge nor understanding,

they walk around in darkness;

all the foundations of the earth are shaken.

I say, “You are gods,

children of the Most High, all of you;

nevertheless, you shall die like mortals,

and fall like any prince.”

Rise up, O God, judge the earth;

for all the nations belong to you!

Cinderella may be the most enduring of all fairy tales. And I don't just mean enduring as a story, like it still works for today's audiences. I also mean that Cinderella has to endure a lot. Her mother dies, and after her dad remarries and then also dies, her stepmother and stepsisters make life a living hell for her. Cinderella has to deal with the daily grind of caring for three ungrateful unrealistic, arrogant woman-children. She competes in the sprint around the house, and yet a marathon of injustice. When the royal ball is announced, she has to excel in improvised dress making. The mouse training competition—that's more of Uncle Walt's creation than the original—but Cinderella does have to run away from the castle when the clock strikes twelve and the spell runs out. She keeps on going even when one of her fancy shoes falls off. Cinderella always has to be on her toes in that story, enduring one challenge after another.

That is, until finally the glass slipper fits and they live happily ever after.

1.

If only happily ever after always came.

Instead many people are still waiting for their fairy tale ending, still enduring a series of challenges and frustrations and tragedies that have come their way, relentless, seemingly unending in pushing them down in sorrow or injustice. We experience an illness that jeopardizes a job; strife or addiction that tears a family apart; a cancer diagnosis; an unsuccessful attempt to balance work and family. That's bad enough, but it gets worse for people who have fewer economic resources. Then you may add in a childhood where food, clothes or school supplies are never a certainty; where housing is dilapidated; where a cycle of violence looms over the neighborhood or in the home; where a person's sexual orientation endangers them while growing up or as adults trying to just be who they are, peaceful in a dance club.

And this week we've been reminded that happily ever after seems like a pipe dream for groups of citizens who reasonably fear police and for police who fear people they are supposed to serve and protect. The threat of evil looms out there, real life evil and real life injustice, not just the fairy tale kind.

2.

Apparently, endurance was already necessary around 2,500 years ago around when Psalm 82 was written. The psalm refers to injustice at the hands of the wicked, the need for the weak and needy and orphan to be rescued, the lowly and the destitute to be delivered.

The majority of the people have endured for a long time. Their running shoes are wearing out, their glass slippers are falling off, their carriages are

turning back into pumpkins, their clothes and their lives are coming apart at the seams.

Their wicked stepmother and stepsisters are going to have the last laugh. Injustice has been endured too long.

The Psalmist doesn't frame these injustices with fairy tale language, but they do engage the imagination just the same.

Psalm 82 instead imaginatively describes a heavenly board meeting, the divine council, convening with a bunch of ancient gods gathering around a table. God, as the Hebrew people knew and know God, takes his place at the meeting (at the head of the table I presume).

God then unleashes some wrath, basically saying, "How long will you judge unjustly, you gods. You should be bringing justice to the people! You don't know what you're doing! I've got an offer you can't refuse. You're fired; you're ALL fired! You don't belong up her. You're going to die just like all the mortals."

Now, does God actually single-handedly and hostilely take over a divine council filled with polytheist gods? I don't think so. If you try to take this Scripture reading literally, you will find yourself in some very interesting theological territory.

Most of the judgment from the psalm is directed at the demigods by God. But the Hebrews were beginning to believe at that time as we do today that there were no other gods, that all other gods were fabrications or imperfect imitations of the one true God. So if they aren't real and have no real power, can we fully blame them?

After the psalm writer concludes the imagined divine council meeting, the psalm writer turns from the story to God directly, bringing the psalm to a climax at the very end, saying "Rise up, O God, judge the earth; for all the nations belong to you!" It's on you now, God. You're on the clock, it's your responsibility to fix things. We've endured long enough.

3.

The Good News from today's reading is that **God not only gives the people enduring spirits but also sparks in them a hopeful imagination of faith and peace.** To begin with, God gives the people endurance. Like Cinderella who somehow runs the gauntlet of tragedy and challenge, the people mentioned in the psalm have persevered and endured all sorts of things in order to still shout out for justice. That in itself is a wonder to behold. But then also, if God is the one God to whom all nations belong, then this Psalm writer's imagination should be credited in part to God. God sparks the vision that the writer has that things don't have to be this way anymore. The demigods can be banished; the reign of the one God can really get going. This vision in itself points to the God who inspires such a vision in the first place, who sparks the imagination of what is possible. Perhaps most importantly, the vision sparked by God and the writer's imagination is one filled with conflict, but also with faith, hope and peace. Faith that the true God would rise up; hope that change into the future was possible; and peace in that the overthrow of the demigods is not done by violently killing them per se but by simply making them subject to the eventual death that comes to all us mortals. God, the writer imagines, doesn't require a bloody coup or civil war. Taken together, then, this imaginative psalm is an expression of faith, hope and peace that points to God's will in a broken world that yearns for healing.

4.

In the Christian faith, we can add to our interpretation of the psalm. We believe not only in God and human endurance, but also in Christ who endures all things in life and in death on a cross; we believe in the Holy Spirit who inspires young people to have visions and the elderly to dream dreams. We believe in God's gifts of faith, hope and love.

And the good news for us is that God continues to spark our hopeful imagination in the face of injustice today, to oppose and depose the demigods of the world and the imagination of fear that they inspire. We can envision and live out that there is no god of the white people, god of the black people, god of the woman or man, but the one God. We can pray for God to dispel the imagination of fear that has struck police officers in encounters especially with African-American men and led them to decisions to shoot when no threat was imminent. We can question our own imaginations, and whether our imagination of fear runs away with us, and how the systems of our nation and world have put us at advantage and others at a disadvantage, because we fear the other. We can pray for God to dispel the imagination of fear that gripped the man in Dallas when he killed five dutiful white police officers. We can pray for a hopeful vision of justice that comes through peaceful means rather than violence. We can pray and act and vote for a nation that can endure through the present violent intolerance and prejudice and find healing by together rejecting racism and violence.

The power of the imagination, our individual imagination, our collective imagination, God's imagination, is strong.

We can imagine out of fear, out of resentment, out of love, out of hope. Through Christ our Prince Charming, we the church can endure now for a happily ever after, but until then God calls us to imagine and do justice now with God. More of Baton Rouge, Minneapolis, Dallas will come our way and worse if fear steers our nation. Let's not wait until our country turns into a pumpkin to make our way toward a better future as God's people. God and we are on the clock together.

The integrity our all our lives depends on us truly being one nation, under God, indivisible with liberty and justice for all. Amen.