

Defining Words of Faith 7: *Sovereignty*

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Micah 6:1-4, 6-8

Hear what the LORD says: Rise, plead your case before the mountains, and let the hills hear your voice. ²Hear, you mountains, the controversy of the LORD, and you enduring foundations of the earth; for the LORD has a controversy with his people, and he will contend with Israel. ³“O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you? Answer me! ⁴For I brought you up from the land of Egypt, and redeemed you from the house of slavery; and I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam.

⁶“With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? ⁷Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?” ⁸He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

Luke 4:14-30

⁴Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. ¹⁵He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone. ¹⁶When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, ¹⁷and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: ¹⁸“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, ¹⁹to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

²⁰And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. ²¹Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” ²²All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth.

They said, “Is not this Joseph’s son?” ²³He said to them, “Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, ‘Doctor, cure yourself!’ And you will say, ‘Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.’” ²⁴And he said, “Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown.

²⁵But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; ²⁶yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon.

²⁷There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.” ²⁸When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage.

²⁹They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff.

³⁰But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

Still wet from his baptism in the previous chapter, Jesus goes back to his hometown and reads from the great prophet Isaiah. Everyone loves it. “O my,” they said to one another, “look how Joseph’s son turned out.” Then Jesus preaches the text he had just read; he talks about how these ancient words apply to them, in their day; he illustrates his sermon with stories from their own religious tradition, stories that push the boundaries of their worldview. When there were many widows during the famine, Elijah raised the son of a gentile widow – a complete outsider to the people of ancient Israel. When there were many lepers in ancient Israel, a soldier from the longtime enemy, Syria, was healed of leprosy by Elisha.

Jesus is reminding the hometown crowd that the Bible stories are not vague – they get very real and very specific. They have been passed down from generation to generation in order to reveal: what God loves, the things God cares about, how God acts, and how we are called to participate in sharing God’s goodness with others, and healing what’s wrong with the world. So when Jesus moves from simply reading scripture to telling the congregation what the text means for them in real time, they get really angry. Filled with rage, we are told, they lead him to the high hill near town and threaten to throw him off. Simply put, Jesus preaches a sermon, and some in the congregation try to kill him. As a pastoral colleague of mine put it, “Not every sermon is a good one, but killing the preacher, at least to me, seems a bit extreme.”¹

You see the people in Nazareth were on edge about what was going on in the world. They did not like the people in political power. The economy was in a shambles and the tax burden unfair. The same old enemies were pressing at the gate: people from other nations had different customs and brought the same old conflicts. People who called their God by another name; people who were of a different race.

¹ Grateful to Tom Are of Village Presbyterian for this comment and thoughts about the political realities of the gospel addresses that follow from “Are we Supposed to Talk about this in Church,” 5/15/22.

The anxiety of the world came into Sabbath worship with the people. As long as the scripture reading seemed far away and long ago and addressed a time in the past in the glorious poetry of Isaiah – it was fine. Kind of like what we always do on Christmas Eve when we read Isaiah: *The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light...*” then we feel pretty good about lighting our candles and going home. But that day in Nazareth, Jesus got specific about the darkness Isaiah is talking about – what it’s like for the poor, the captives, the oppressed, and lo and behold some people wanted to kill Jesus.

Now, I was taught long ago by my preaching professors not to tell too many personal stories in the pulpit, and never to identify myself with Jesus, but I kind of understand what Jesus was up against that day. I think we all do. We are hesitant to want to hear a gospel word that impinges uncomfortably upon our lives. And yet, Jesus comes at us week after week with a boundary-breaking, fully inclusive gospel that urges us to live our faith in a world of oppression and need. Some of you know – I get a little bit of feedback, not much, that I am too political in the pulpit. I also get a fair amount of feedback that I am not political enough in the pulpit. I figure if I am irritating people of both perspectives in equal measure I’m doing ok. The truth is I take no joy preaching about things that might elevate someone’s blood pressure. And frankly, I bristle at those who get frustrated that I talk about the Bible more than politics. But these issues are not about me. They are about the anxiety of the world coming into worship. They are about the divisiveness out there in the political realm walking into church, and wanting or not wanting the experience of church to address what is going on.

Here’s the thing about the gospel – it is always addressing what is going on in the world. Our biblical faith and theological heritage speak to real issues in our world in real time – which are often these days deemed political, as they were in Nazareth that day. Go back to Aristotle and you will find the definition of politics as “the science of good sense assigned to affairs of the city.” Politics is a way of talking about what is

good for human community; it's about policies which determine how we live together. Of course we do not all agree on what is good for human community. And, it is not the calling of the preacher to proclaim his or her politics and call it Christianity. But it is our calling to interpret scripture which is also "assigned to the affairs of the city," because the Bible is all about the welfare of human community.

It is our calling to offer a biblical vision for how we are to live with one another – breaking down barriers of oppression, exclusion and division so that the abundance of God's good creation is available to all. That means the church has to talk about issues like racism, gun violence and human rights. For the Bible begins with the affirmation that every human being is made in the image and likeness of God, and just a few chapters in we are called into the covenant community of Abraham and Sarah so that we may be instruments of God's blessing until all the families of the earth are blessed.

You may have noticed that generally God does not spend a whole lot of time in a sanctuary. God is hurling stars through the universe; God is listening to the sounds of human suffering, and sending people like Moses to rescue them from slavery; and people like Isaiah to sing them home from their misery in exile. God is roaring in the wilderness like a Mother Bear for her young when they are in harm's way, and like a Mighty Warrior, God is judging the nations for their injustices and inequities.

Did you notice in the Micah text we just heard that the Lord has called the people of ancient Israel into court to settle the dispute over their faithlessness, and who sits as God's jury? *Plead your case before the mountains; let the hills hear your voice!* The created order is God's courtroom, and the very mountains and hills bear witness to the controversy God has with a people who are behaving as if they have forgotten God's saving acts.

We call this Sovereignty. God is the supreme power in all of creation and this Sovereign God chooses to govern the human family with steadfast love and mercy. Based on a close reading of scripture, our theological forebears of the Protestant Reformation insisted that the Sovereignty of God in all of creation means that we live our faith everywhere, particularly in the public square.

Theologian David Jensen explains how our understanding of God's Sovereignty influences how Presbyterians have long engaged the faith with implications for public welfare – why Presbyterians founded sixty colleges and universities in this country; why the name Presbyterian is attached to some of the most prominent hospitals in the world; why the United States form of government with its elected representatives and its system of checks and balances between the three branches is largely based on Presbyterian polity. David Jensen writes: “If religion and politics don't mix,” as some would argue, “then one consequence would be to make the Christian faith a private affair.... that we would keep our religion in the realm of quiet devotion, never in public life. The problem with this view, of course, is that it results in a posture profoundly different from Jesus and his followers. Jesus didn't call disciples to retreat piously from the world. Nearly every aspect of his ministry was decidedly public.”

David Jensen gives these examples: “Jesus called leaders to account for their actions; he invited followers from all walks of life; he spoke openly, even controversially, about money, possessions, allegiances, and political arrangements. Public theology, in other words, seems to be what Jesus is all about... Christian faith is *lived*. Our faith flings outward. We live in faith *with others*. Jesus came that all might have life in abundance and those who follow Jesus seek abundant life for the world. This is not to say, Jensen cautions, that religion and politics always mix, but that our faith affects all dimensions of our lives.

Because Jesus offers a vision for how to live the faith today, working with others to seek the flourishing of all creation.”²

Friends, there is a place in our Presbyterian heritage for Christian piety, a spiritual relationship with the Living God, a hope that through Christ we are loved by God, forgiven and freed from sin and death. But that alone will never be the full expression of our Christian life and witness.

Acclaimed novelist and journalist, Dan Wakefield, had a youthful experience of the Christian faith, but he was not a practicing Christian as an adult. Then in midlife, he found himself drawn back toward the faith. He began exploring his spiritual yearnings. At a fancy dinner party in Boston, he was surprised to meet the great Christian priest and writer Henri Nouwen. Wakefield found his way to him, and said, “Father Nouwen, I’ve been on a journey back toward Christ. I have had some tough times in my life and felt the need for something more...” And with that, Nouwen turned and said quite bluntly, “Jesus is about more than helping you get your life together.” And then Nouwen just walked away.³

Wakefield said that honest, blunt exchange was the beginning of his journey back to faith. He realized his yearning for faith had been too small and self-centered. He discovered Christ will provide hope and comfort when we need it. But follow his public path through the gospels, and you see that Jesus represents God’s Sovereign love in and for the world.

If we dare to follow him, we will find ourselves caught up in his mission to reconcile the world to God: bringing good news to the poor,

² David Jensen, “Why Should Theology Be Public?” Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary Windows, Winter 2022.

³ Wakefield story retold by William Willimon, “How Odd of God,” p. 131-132.

release to the captives, recovering sight to the blind, and letting the oppressed go free. The good news for us is that this church offers every member of this family of faith opportunity to be engaged in this good work – through our mission and outreach ministries; environmental justice and peacemaking, through tutoring and our hunger work; through our ecumenical partnerships; through our children’s and youth programs. We are engaged in doing this work through your generous gifts of time, talent, commitment and financial support. It’s hard work; it’s political work; it’s life-giving work because it falls under God’s Sovereign power over the world.

How do we do it? *We seek to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God.*

AMEN.