

“We Will!”
Psalm 72
The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 3, 2023
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A lot of you know that I grew up in Michigan, fairly close to Michigan State University, where my parents worked. It was a privilege to grow up in a small town of 5000 people but then also be a half an hour’s drive from a world-class university with music, sports, theater, dance, and cultural events that I could visit easily due to my parents’ staff status. So, as they say at MSU: “Go green!” (and then you say “go white!”) (Don’t tell Tim Phillips I just had you do that, he’s a wolverine).

Several years ago, Michigan State University adopted the motto “Spartans will.” They’re very specific in their branding of the phrase that they intend the motto to be a declarative “Spartans will” and use “will” as a verb that shows that there is an aspiration and a plan for follow-through, a dedication to work towards a positive impact. It can also be “Spartans will” as a noun, showing the “determination, resilience and optimism”¹ of the MSU community.

Now, though I am a writer, I don’t have a lot of grammar know-how...but that word, “will” that can have a dual meaning, is so fascinating to me.

In Christian communities, there’s often talk about “God’s will” — and no matter where you fall on the theological spectrum with your ideas about if God has a plan and how specific that plan is, “God’s will” as a noun is prevalent when we talk about persisting in our call to bring about a beloved community through doing justice and making peace.

But “will” is also used as a verb to talk about an event that is assured, an occurrence that is coming to pass, an aspiration that is already in process.

And it is the use of that assurance and optimism through the word “will” that drew me to Psalm 72 today. So as I read the psalm aloud from the Inclusive Version, please pay attention to how the word “will” is functioning here.

O God, give your anointed one your judgment—and your justice.
Teach your chosen one to govern your people rightly and bring justice to the oppressed.
The mountains will bring the people peace and the hills justice!
Your anointed will defend the oppressed among the people,
Save the children of the poor, and crush the oppressor.
The reign of your anointed will endure as long as the sun and moon—throughout all generations.

¹ <https://brand.msu.edu/storytelling/spartans-will>

The rule of the chosen one will be
Like rain coming down on the meadow,
Like showers watering the earth.
Justice will flower through the days, and profound peace,
Until the moon be no more.
Your anointed will rule from sea to sea,
And from the Euphrates to the ends of the earth.
The desert tribes will bow before the throne
And the enemies of your chosen one will lick the dust.
Tarshish and the Isle will offer gifts;
Arabia and Sheba will bring tribute.
All rulers will pay homage,
And all the nations will serve your anointed.
Your anointed will rescue the poor when they cry out,
And the oppressed when there is no one to help them.
Your chosen one will take pity on the lowly and the poor,
And will save their lives.
Your chosen one will rescue them all from violence and oppression,
And will treat their blood as precious.
Long live the anointed one!
Bring a tribute of gold from Seba!
Let the ruler be prayed for continually, and blessed day after day!
Let there be an abundance of grain upon the earth--
Let it rustle on the mountaintops!
Let the crops flourish like the forests of Lebanon;
Let them thrive like the grass of the fields.
May the name of your anointed one endure forever,
And continue as long as the sun.
In your chosen the nations of earth will be blessed,
And they will bless the anointed in return.
Blessed by YHWH, the God of Israel,
Who alone does wondrous deeds!
And blessed forever be God's glorious Name;
May the whole earth be filled with God's glory.
Amen, amen!

The commentaries on this passage say the context for this psalm is the coronation of a ruler. Thus, the psalm includes both a charge to the new ruler as well as a prayer for them and their reign. Hebrew Bible scholar Robert Alter is sure to note that though some Christian communities read this psalm as referring to the coming of Jesus (which would happen about 800 years after

this psalm was written), there is no evidence in the psalm itself for it being related to a Messiah.² More likely, this psalm was used in coronation services for kings of Judah and Israel as they were ordained to be leaders and protectors of their kingdoms.

As I read the psalm, did you mark all the times that the word “will” popped up? “Will” does heavy lifting in the psalm, calling for help for the afflicted and deliverance for the oppressed and showing clearly the aspiration for the ruler to be lauded and loved and respected because of their good deeds in the world. The poetry calls in the very Creation to witness to the ruler’s work—justice will be like rain on the earth, the ruler will rule “sea to sea,” “let there be an abundance of grain,” “let it rustle on the mountaintops,” “let the crops flourish” “may the name of the anointed endure as long as the sun”!

Though we are not anointing anyone or observing a coronation here now, the promises in the psalm resonate across time and space to us today:

“Your anointed will defend the oppressed among the people,
Save the children of the poor, and crush the oppressor...
The rule of the chosen one will be
Like rain coming down on the meadow,
Like showers watering the earth.
Justice will flower through the days, and profound peace,
Until the moon be no more...
Your anointed will rescue the poor when they cry out,
And the oppressed when there is no one to help them.
Your chosen one will take pity on the lowly and the poor,
And will save their lives.
Your chosen one will rescue them all from violence and oppression,
And will treat their blood as precious...”

Rescue from oppression. Saving lives. Deliverance from violence. Treating the blood of the lowly and the poor as precious. Don’t we need this aspirational “will” today? Not just from rulers or political leaders, but from each other? Maybe we can receive these words as an invitation to participate in the liberative activities of the Holy...for how can these words ring true as a determination of what can come to be, without our making them real?

What would this world be like if we were the ones to rescue the poor when they cry out, and help the oppressed when there is no one to help them? It may look like growing the work of our Outreach committee and supporting our friend JJ and his feeding ministry. Maybe it would look like increasing our stock of material goods and food to give people who come to the church asking for help. Investing in affordable housing and protections for renters so that more people can afford to live in this city. Being in solidarity with striking artist unions and demanding fair

² Robert Alter’s Hebrew Bible commentary, vol 3 “The Writings,” on psalm 72.

pay for industries that thrive on the labor of unpaid and under-paid workers. Visiting the children of the Holy who are imprisoned and those who live on scraps between hospital visits.

What would this world be like if we were the ones to take pity on the lowly and save their lives? Perhaps abolishing the death penalty. Finding other ways to keep our community safe than relying on police presence. Educating ourselves and our loved ones on mental health first aid. Increasing the visibility of our community as inclusive of LGBTQIA+ people so that folks we haven't reached yet know they are safe and can belong here. Advocating for reproductive justice so that the lives of birthing people are not subject to the whims of politicians obsessed with their own navel-gazing ideas of righteousness.

What would the world be like if we were the ones to rescue people from violence and oppression and treat all blood as precious? Perhaps it looks like gun control and reforming the culture of violence in this country. Eliminating the fear of school shootings so that as our children and youth and young adults return to school this week, there will be no more kindergarteners cowering under desks and teenagers blocking the windows in their classroom doors and college students jumping out of windows and front pages of newspapers with the text messages sent during shelter-in-place warnings. Maybe it would look like supportive housing for people fleeing domestic violence, and shelters where families can stay together. Immigrants at the borders of this country being met with welcome and access to resources instead of prison wire on floating balloons that kill children in a river.

Friends, this psalm calls us in, invites us to participate in the liberative work of the Holy, living into the hope-filled and determined aspiration of the word "will." I am reminded of a quote from theologian Jurgen Moltmann I saw recently, "Christianity is completely and entirely and utterly hope - a looking forward and a forward direction; hope is not just an appendix. So Christianity inevitably means a new setting forth and a transformation of the present."³

Do we have the will to set forth and transform our present? To look honestly and critically at the resources of time, energy, money, space that we have and say "we will" to co-creating a beloved community with God? Do we have it in us to commit ourselves to hope, to share our aspirations with each other until they are not our "wildest dreams" but the next step in the process of doing justice and making peace?

Writer James Baldwin, in an essay in 1961 wrote, "Any real change implies the breakup of the world as one has always known it, the loss of all that gave one an identity, the end of safety. And at such a moment, unable to see and not daring to imagine what the future will now bring forth, one clings to what one knew, or dreamed that one possessed. Yet, it is only when a man is able, without bitterness or self-pity, to surrender a dream he has long possessed that he is set free — he has set himself free — for higher dreams, for greater privileges."⁴

³ Jurgen Moltmann on Twitter, August 2023.

⁴ [*Nobody Knows My Name*](#) (a collection of essays from 1961), James Baldwin

Beloved church, I think the time is right for us to dream these higher dreams. The world as we have known it is changing, and we are hearing around us the voice of the Holy through each other calling us to reconfigure what we expect for the future—to let go of the idea that it will always be this way, that we are powerless against the corporations and financial machines that power this society. The voice of the Holy is echoing through the words in our scripture today, asking us “will you?” as They lay out a clear dream for what in the Hebrew Bible they know as “shalom,” a world characterized by the flourishing of all life.

Dear ones, I invite you to join me in a call and response as we commit together to actively participating in our lives, the life of this community, and the world around us for the sake of justice and peace. So when indicated, please respond “we will!”

Will you advocate for the poor, the marginalized, the ones who live with their “backs up against the wall”, so that they may access what is needed to live healthy, safe and full lives?

We will!

Will you listen to each other and dream together about what may be possible in a future where this church lives out the hopes of our forebears in serving the least of these?

We will!

Will you think not only of yourselves and your own small corner of the world, but understand that your words and actions have a significant impact beyond yourself?

We will!

Will you work to end violence in all its forms, to educate yourselves and your neighbors about peace, to protect all children and to provide for the generations coming after us?

We will!

Will you commit to hope—the difficult, challenging, relentless hope—so that we extend our vision of what is possible in this world to include the aspirations laid out in the psalms, that idea that peace is not only possible but already coming, and that justice is assured and we can make it so?

We will!

Beloveds, hear the good news this day: though we are not rulers of powerful lands, leaders of political parties, or influencers with millions of followers, we have power in ourselves and in our community. The work of communal flourishing and right relationship for all Creation is slow and incremental...do not be discouraged by this. Instead, know your power...the power to shape the world by being yourself, loving how you love, and showing up for the world that we know to be potential. We will a world in which deep abiding love is the norm, and we will make it so.

May it ever be so. Amen.