

“The Hope of the Poor”

- 7 *But the LORD is king forever;
 he has set up his throne for judgment.*
- 8 *He rules the world with righteousness;
 he judges the nations with justice.*
- 9 *The LORD is a refuge for the oppressed
 a place of safety in times of trouble.*
- 10 *Those who know you, LORD, will trust you;
 you do not abandon anyone who comes to you.*
- 11 *Sing praise to the LORD, who rules in Zion!
 Tell every nation what he has done!*
- 12 *God remembers those who suffer;
 he does not forget their cry,
 and he punishes those who wrong them.*
- 18 *The needy will not always be neglected;
 the hope of the poor will not be crushed forever.*
- Psalm 9:7-12, 18 (TEV)

The ninth Psalm is one of the many enthronement psalms in the Psalter, the songs with which the ancient Hebrews commemorated God’s sovereign rule over not only Israel, but over all the nations of the earth. Through these poems, Israel celebrated God’s reign of righteousness and justice in the face of the unrighteousness and injustice which characterized the reign of so many of its own kings. It was as if the New Year’s celebration of enthronement called the ruling powers to account and measured them with the standard of the One whose rule epitomized the righteousness and justice demanded by the law and the prophets.

The Bible is full of stories about the ways God’s justice is subversive to the ruling powers, ever calling them to remember and honor the very people they tend to forget, oppress, and exploit. Throughout scripture, God sends prophets on dangerous missions to confront rulers about unjust treatment of the disadvantaged and vulnerable. Through Moses, God calls Pharaoh to free Hebrew slaves held captive in Egypt (Exod. 3-14). Through Elijah, God confronts Ahab over the wrongful execution of Naboth and the unlawful seizure of his vineyard (I Kings 21). Through Isaiah, God calls the religious establishment to turn from empty ritual to “*seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, and plead for the widow*” (Isa. 1:14-17). Through Nathan, God uses a parable about a rich man stealing a lamb from a poor man to indict David for his adulterous relationship with Bathsheba and the death of Uriah (II Sam. 12). And repeatedly throughout the Psalter, we are reminded that leadership which honors God must embody God’s compassion and mercy for the poor.

Psalm 9 not only confronts the powerful; it also comforts the vulnerable. While verses 9-12 have universal appeal to everyone who feels oppressed and troubled, they speak directly to the desperately poor and disadvantaged of every age who hunger and are not

fed, who thirst and cannot find water, who want to work but cannot find a job, who have a job but cannot earn a living. To these—to children in Rio de Janeiro who walk the streets with no place to call home, to young people in African villages who want an education but have no access to schools or books, to the sick in America who have no health care, to the elderly in Ecuador who have no safety net—the psalmist promises that God will provide a place of refuge and safety, a compassionate hearing, and punishment for those who would oppress and exploit.

To anyone who is aware of the depth and breadth of human suffering in the world today, the psalmist's promise regarding the just God who hears and responds to the cries of sufferers poses a critical question. *How does the hearing and compassionate God respond to the suffering?* Scripture provides an immediate and certain answer: *through the people of God.* We are called to hear as God hears, to do justice as God does justice, to respond with mercy and compassion as God responds with mercy and compassion. We are called to be the ears, hands, and feet of God in all of the near and distant places where people hurt.

We are so because we are followers of Jesus who incarnated the righteousness and justice of God as he brought good news to the poor, release to the captives, liberation to the oppressed, and healing to the sick (Luke 4:14-19; 7:18-23). We are so because we are the very Body of the Christ who was crucified and raised to inaugurate the Reign of God on earth. We are so because the Spirit comes upon us and opens our eyes to see, our ears to hear, our hands to help, and our treasuries to share.

On any given day, the bad news of human suffering makes it hard not to regard the good news of the psalmist—“*the LORD is king forever. . . He rules the world with righteousness; he judges the nations with justice*”—as so much wishful thinking. Overwhelmed by the bad news, we ask, “Where is the righteous and just LORD?” But then, like recovering amnesiacs, we remember who and whose we are. We remember the LORD is among us, the Reign of God is in our very midst. Propelled by our true identities and the power of the Spirit, we hear the cries, we act with compassion, and we confront the powers who neglect, oppress, and exploit. Then and only then the psalmist's final promise is fulfilled:

*The needy will not always be neglected;
the hope of the poor will not be crushed forever.*