

## Psalm 32

- 1 Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven,  
whose sin is covered.
- 2 Happy are those to whom the LORD imputes no iniquity,  
and in whose spirit there is no deceit.
- 3 While I kept silence, my body wasted away  
through my groaning all day long.
- 4 For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;  
my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. *Selah*
- 5 Then I acknowledged my sin to you,  
and I did not hide my iniquity;  
I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,"  
and you forgave the guilt of my sin. *Selah*
- 6 Therefore let all who are faithful  
offer prayer to you;  
at a time of distress, the rush of mighty waters  
shall not reach them.
- 7 You are a hiding place for me;  
you preserve me from trouble;  
you surround me with glad cries of deliverance. *Selah*
- 8 I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go;  
I will counsel you with my eye upon you.
- 9 Do not be like a horse or a mule, without understanding,  
whose temper must be curbed with bit and bridle,  
else it will not stay near you.
- 10 Many are the torments of the wicked,  
but steadfast love surrounds those who trust in the LORD.
- 11 Be glad in the LORD and rejoice, O righteous,  
and shout for joy, all you upright in heart.

## Judges 2:1-5, 16-23; 3:1-5

2Now the angel of the LORD went up from Gilgal to Bochim, and said, 'I brought you up from Egypt, and brought you into the land that I had promised to your ancestors. I said, "I will never break my covenant with you. <sup>2</sup>For your part, do not make a covenant with the inhabitants of this land; tear down their altars." But you have not obeyed my command. See what you have done! <sup>3</sup>So now I say, I will not drive them out before you; but they shall become adversaries to you, and their gods shall be a snare to you.' <sup>4</sup>When the angel of the LORD spoke these words to all the Israelites, the people lifted up their voices and wept. <sup>5</sup>So they named that place Bochim, and there they sacrificed to the LORD.

16 Then the LORD raised up judges, who delivered them out of the power of those who plundered them. <sup>17</sup>Yet they did not listen even to their judges; for they lusted after other gods and bowed down to them. They soon turned aside from the way in which their ancestors had walked, who had obeyed the commandments of the LORD; they did not follow their example. <sup>18</sup>Whenever the LORD raised up judges for them, the LORD was with the judge, and he delivered them from the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge; for the LORD would be moved to pity by their groaning because of those who persecuted and oppressed them. <sup>19</sup>But whenever the judge died, they would relapse and behave worse than their ancestors, following other gods, worshipping them and bowing down to them. They would not drop any of their practices or their stubborn ways. <sup>20</sup>So the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel; and he said, 'Because this people have transgressed my covenant that I commanded their ancestors, and have not obeyed my voice, <sup>21</sup>I will no longer drive out before them any of the nations that Joshua left when he died.' <sup>22</sup>In order to test Israel, whether or not they would take care to walk in the way of the LORD as their ancestors did, <sup>23</sup>the LORD had left those nations, not driving them out at once, and had not handed them over to Joshua.

3Now these are the nations that the LORD left to test all those in Israel who had no experience of any war in Canaan <sup>2</sup>(it was only that successive generations of Israelites might know war, to teach those who had no experience of it before): <sup>3</sup>the five lords of the Philistines, and all the Canaanites, and the Sidonians, and the Hivites who lived on Mount Lebanon, from Mount Baal-hermon as far as Lebo-hamath. <sup>4</sup>They were for the testing of Israel, to know whether Israel would obey the commandments of the LORD, which he commanded their ancestors by Moses. <sup>5</sup>So the Israelites lived among the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites;

## Sermon

So, lately John and I have been watching the 1976 BBC miniseries I, Claudius, starring Derek Jacobi and Siân (Shan) Phillips and Patrick Stewart, back when he had actual hair. I'm guessing you didn't see that sermon opener coming. What are the kids into these days? BBC dramas about ancient Rome that are nearly 50 years old. Bing. Bang. Boom.

Anyway, I, Claudius is based on the 1930's novel by the same name written by Robert Graves, and it tells a fictionalized account of the Julio-Claudian dynasty who ruled the Roman Empire right around those years where BCE turns into CE. And in spite of the fact that it looks like it was shot in someone's basement with Enoch as the head of your makeup department, it's amazing. The writing and acting are incredible, and the story is engrossing. There's all the great family drama, you know, grama poisoning her grandchildren and aunts and uncles being shipped off to live alone on deserted islands for their various crimes against the emperor. But beyond that, I'm personally interested in the background of the empire...the battles back and forth with the Germanic tribes, or the concern about the influence of Rome over varying outlying provinces and the like.

I think, in general, a lot of people are fascinated by Rome because it raises a really hard question for us: how does a political and economic powerhouse, the most powerful army the western world had known, with the full might and power of the church behind it (at least in later years), go from the height of control to utter obliviation in a matter of generations. I suspect, in part, we ask these questions about power and control and the rise and fall of empires because we're reflecting back on ourselves.

It's not just Rome, of course. It's a question we ask of the Persians and the Greeks, the British, and the Belgian colonial experiment. It's a question we're really asking about ourselves, here in the US. What does it mean to be part of a nation? How do nations rise, and how do they fall?

These are, at a far more granular scale, the questions we will begin to hear in the book of Judges, which we will be sampling from over the season of Lent. Judges is the story of the turbulent political reinvention of the Hebrew people as the nation of Israel...and their many missteps along the way. Now, Judges is a weird little book of the Bible, one I'm guessing a lot of you haven't probably spent much time in. It only shows up once in the entire 3 year scope of the lectionary, for example.

Judges, to the best of scholarly understanding, is a collection of stories from the disparate and separate tribal family groups of Israel, before it became Israel as we know it under the leadership of the Kings. All these stories about their warriors and leaders, their military defeats and moments of glory. They were collected and then over the next, oh, thousand years or so, they were edited and smoothed over and forced into a cohesive story we now call Judges.

It formally covers the 300 years between when Moses and Joshua led the Hebrew people out of slavery in Egypt, into the desert wandering period, across the river into the promised land, where, inconveniently, the Canaanites were living. Up until when King Saul and King David ushered in the time of kingship, right around the year 1000 BCE, so like 3000 years ago. During that window the people didn't have a religious figure head, like Moses, or a king, like David. They had Judges, which in Hebrew is maybe better translated to mean Leader or Magistrate. The Judges, as collected and told in this story, were mostly military leaders and warriors who were called for a time to give shape and support to the various

tribes of Israel, who were always being overrun by their neighbors—the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites.

Judges is a dark, violent, and pretty hard story to read. It follows this pattern where God says—alright, I love you, just follow my rules. The Israelites do what is evil in the eyes of God, so God sends an enemy to crush them, Israel calls out in distress and repentance, God comes along and gives them a Judge to lead and save them, but then, like a couple of years later, they're right back at it. Doing evil, getting punished, and the cycle begins again. But instead of learning a lesson, this cycle continues again and again through 12 different Judges, and it gets worse each time. The evil done by Israel gets a little bit more profane, the Judge a little less capable, and the social and religious ties dissolve just a bit more. Until, at the end of this book, everything is left in total disarray.

If you haven't read deeply into the book of Judges, the brutality of the people's selfishness and depravity is likely beyond what you are imagining. It goes from bad to worse, and toward the end we start hearing stories so violent I won't actually be preaching on them, because they're too much to hear from the pulpit. The story of the woman of Judges 19 is the only time I've actually cried over scripture.

Throughout the book, there's this line that repeats again and again: The people did what was right in their own eyes, and there was no king in Israel. You can imagine that this book is a spiral, but it goes ever downward. The people doing what is right in their own eyes, refusing to follow the leader given to them, and in their depravity they are punished still further.

Needless to say, this is a hard book to read. If you do choose to read beyond the texts I'm presenting on Sundays, please do come and chat with me. There's so much to read and unpack here, and I'd love to be a part of that with you. But I'm preaching on it, and I'd encourage you to read it, because I think it is a cautionary tale for our time.

I'm not terribly concerned, personally, about waning political prestige or influence. I think it might be good for the Christian church, and America writ large, to take a more reasonable role in the vast scope of the world. But I am concerned about the ways that disintegration of social safety nets, the loss of social norms of kindness (if it ever really existed), the care for the widow and the orphan, the place of women, and the relative acceptance of violence toward women and children and anyone...I am concerned about those things. And this is the story of Judges.

But as we delve into these stories for the next few weeks, here's what I want you to notice and remember and maybe put a little hope in: God never actually disappears. The people get pretty dang terrible, sometimes beyond belief. But when they cry out, God hears them. And God responds. God brings a new Judge, and God tries again. There's this beautiful hope, for me, that in the midst of all of our human muck, God comes through. And even at the end, when all seems lost, this story transforms. Into the Kings, which, like, sure...has some real dark moments too. But God's still there. And not all is lost. The story of Ruth and Naomi and Boaz, the kind and good Boaz, the one who repairs relationships and brings

hope to his neighbors, the upright and good Boaz. You know when that story takes place? In the time of the Judges.

So, our invitation this Lent is to listen closely, to be appalled at times by the ability of people to hurt and harm one another, in local, person-to-person ways. And also in the larger, social systems and structures which leave the most vulnerable members of the community open to harm. And yet always be attentive to listening for the quiet voice of God and the continuing goodness that survives and speaks and cares for the people when they call. That's the hope of these stories for the Judges, and for us. That in the midst of what may feel like social disintegration and real hurt, when we ask, God is present, and God will work with us to rebuild the communities we love.