



## Peace for My Brothers and Sisters

### Psalm 133

A sermon by Paul K.-K. Cho  
For Washington Street UMC  
On August 23, 2020

Greetings, in the name of Christ Jesus our Lord.

We have before us a wonderful psalm on which to meditate. Given the topic of *shalom* within the context of an ongoing conversation about racism, I can hardly think of a better psalm to guide us. In fact, so rich is Psalm 133 for our purposes, I will limit myself to one observation about each of the three verses after a brief comment about the overall worldview of the psalm.

Psalm 133 places before us, as the psalmist puts it, “a good and lovely” vision of brotherly unity: “Behold, how good and lovely it is when brothers dwell in true unity.” It is a vision that one might liken to the concept of *shalom*. Then, the psalm turns somewhat abruptly to two images. First, we have the peculiar imagery of oil flowing down Aaron’s head to the edges of his priestly robe. Second, we have the enigmatic image of the dew of Hermon, which is located on the border between present day Lebanon and Syria, flowing down to the mountains of Zion, that is, Jerusalem, located more than a hundred miles to the south. The psalm, in total, asks us, the readers, to compare the three images found in the three verses and to riddle out the significance of their relationship. While I’d love to tease out the hermeneutical significance of each word and phrase, so as not to try your patience, allow me to offer the following by way of summary:

The psalm assumes an intimate and intricate relationship among three distinct layers of lived reality: (1) the Quotidian reality that obtains among brothers who live together, (2) the cultural reality that is created and sustained by the memorialization of historical events, and (3) the cosmic reality that is actualized by the celebration of foundational stories. To put this backwards, the psalm teaches us that we have to get our theology right and our cultural and social practices right if we want to achieve the deceptively mundane goal of living in true unity.

Let us begin, as one does, in the middle with verse 2, which reads: “Like good oil on the head that flows down the beard, the beard of Aaron that flows down the edges of his robes.”

In the middle of our compact and riddling psalm, we find Aaron, apparently drenched from head to toe with expensive oil.

Oil, in the ancient Mediterranean world, had a number of uses. Oil could be used to cook, to light lamps, to treat lice infestation, to soothe the weary traveler with its cooling and aromatic properties, and of course to anoint persons to particular offices of high importance, such as kingship and the priesthood. We likely have a number of these practices in view in our psalm,

but the one that stands out is the practice of anointing priests with oil, as detailed, for example, in Exodus 28–29 and Leviticus 8. Central to the consecrational reading is the figure of Aaron, who appears in verse 2, and the Aaronide priesthood who enjoyed control over the Jerusalem Temple, that is, Zion.

Much might be said about Aaron, the Aaronide priesthood, and Jerusalem in the context of this psalm. What I want to focus on is that (1) the consecration of Aaron would have been a distant historical memory for the psalmist and his contemporaries, who likely lived in the post-exilic period, and that (2) Moses, Aaron's more famous brother, who poured the anointing oil on Aaron's head, remains out of view in the psalm.

Let's talk about the first point, that the consecration of Aaron is a distant historical memory. What is important to note is that the distant memory of Aaron's consecration is kept alive by its continued ritualized celebration through history, and that the memorialization of the historical past makes that history have significance for present lived reality for the psalmist. Aaron's anointing, which could have fallen victim to historical amnesia, is, through continued celebration, given cultural and social power, not only over the sacred matters of the Temple, but also in matters concerning the quotidian relationship among brothers trying to live peaceably together. That is, Psalm 133 teaches us that it matters for our daily living together what parts of our history we choose to memorialize and celebrate.

It matters also, the psalm teaches us, how we memorialize and celebrate our past, and this brings us to our second observation that Moses remains outside the frame. Moses remaining outside the frame and invisible to the reader means that the spotlight shines squarely on Aaron. For once, Aaron – not the towering figure of Moses – become the center of celebration and remembrance. And I wonder if this stepping aside of the more famous brother to make way for the other brother is one hidden lesson of the riddle that is Psalm 133 for brothers seeking to live in true unity.

In 1852, the Rochester Ladies' Anti-Slavery Society attempted to do something similar. The white female members of the Anti-Slavery Society invited Frederick Douglass to deliver a Fourth of July speech. Douglass insisted that the speech be given on July 5<sup>th</sup>. Why? Because for Douglass and other African Americans July 4<sup>th</sup> not only rang hollow – Douglass says, speaking to a white audience, “This Fourth of July is yours, not mine. You may rejoice, I must mourn” — but it also festered with the living reality of slave auctions that often took place on “Independence Day.” When white Americans stepped aside and allowed their silenced and, more than that, brutally oppressed siblings into the spotlight, what we got is what the Yale historian David Blight called “the rhetorical masterpiece of American abolitionism.”

I frequently speak about Douglass's speech, “What to a Slave Is the Fourth of July?” and I meditate on it every July Fourth in the midst of hamburger grilling and fireworks gazing – or, this year, in the midst of social distancing and childcare providing – and I think David Blight is wrong. The speech is not only “the rhetorical masterpiece of American abolitionism” but also the masterpiece of American conscience, and it rings true today.

I know that the present sermon series on “Living Together” was launched on the heels of “A Charge for the Church of South Washington” that Pastor Thomas James delivered the day after Independence Day on July 5, on the anniversary of Douglass’s speech. It was a charge, I understand, that called two historically and predominantly white congregations (Washington Street UMC and Olde Towne Community Church) and two historically and predominantly black congregations (Beulah Baptist Church and Roberts Memorial UMC), all located within 0.4 miles of each other, to begin the work of addressing the sin of racism. I found the announcement heartening, especially given the historical entanglements between Washington Street and Roberts Memorial. I commend the charge, and I join you in spirit and in tears – for, the Lord knows, if this work does not bring tears and the gnashing of teeth, we will know it has been a failure.

So, I listened to Pastor James’s charge to the church and his sermons on “Living Together,” and I also tried to listen to corresponding sermons given at the other congregations. I was saddened to find that, while I could listen to sermons by pastors of OTCC, I could not find recordings of Pastor Driskell of Beulah Baptist nor of Pastor Danieli of Roberts UMC. I wonder if there are ways the spotlight can be shared or even given over, so that we can all more easily hear our brothers’ voices? (I, for one, would be willing to contribute to that cause.)

Allow me now, in the few minutes I have left to address you, to conjure up two more strings and tie them up in a tangle for you to unravel.

Verse 3 of our psalm speaks of the Mount of Hermon and the Mountains of Zion. The verse brings into view the cosmic, mythological landscape of ancient Israel. Mount Hermon, the highest mountain in the region, was believed by many to be the home of the Canaanite deity Baal, who was worshipped all over the region as the storm god, so the lord of life-giving water. And Zion, as you no doubt know, was the Holy Mountain of the God of Israel. Now, the imagery of the dew of Hermon flowing down to the mountains of Zion, over a hundred miles to the south, is open to a range of interpretations. One important interpretation, it seems to me, has to do with the worship of Baal giving way to the worship of the God of Israel as the true source of life-giving water. It has to do with abandoning one set of theological beliefs and mythological stories for another set. It has to do with what the ancients would have thought of as changing out the mythologies about one god for another and what we might think of as a theological reformation. In this, Psalm 133 is teaching us the importance of yet another layer of reality in the pursuit of brotherly unity. It is teaching us that our theology, how and what we say about God, has a direct impact on whether or not we can live in true unity with our brothers and sisters. There is such a thing as bad theology and good theology. More to the point, there is such a thing as bad Christian theology and good Christian theology.

At the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1844 in New York City, a resolution was passed demanding that a slave owning Southern bishop resign from his post. Following this conference, the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, was formed. There were also more local repercussions: Pro-Southern, that is to say, pro-slavery members of Trinity

Methodist Episcopal Church, located in Alexandria, Va., left Trinity to form Washington Street Church. The newly formed church named as its pastor the Reverend Davis. At this point, the freed and enslaved congregants of Black Methodists of Trinity, who met in what was then called Davis Chapel, in protest to the Reverend Davis, renamed their chapel, Roberts Chapel and is today Roberts Memorial UMC.

I imagine that on the two pulpits of Washington Street and Roberts Chapel two very different types of sermons, espousing two different theologies would have been preached. On one we might have heard of the Israelites crossing the Jordan River into the promised land. On the other, we no doubt would have heard something quite different. Robert Jones, the CEO and founder of Public Religion Research Institute, describes what we might have heard in this way: “The unsettling truth is that, for nearly all of American history, the Jesus conjured by most white congregations was not merely indifferent to the status quo of racial inequality; he demanded its defense and preservation as part of the natural, divinely ordained order of things.”

The “Charge for the Church of South Washington,” as I understand it, calls the four churches, OTCC, Beulah, Roberts, and Washington Street, to confront this past, to recognize the present that has been built on the long legacy of that past, and to work – by the grace of God – toward preaching a Jesus who is not indifferent to racial inequality but demands its dismantling and eradication as a radical sin that has far too long festered in the American Christian soul. That, I imagine, is the only way that we will get our theology right, along with other cultural and social practices, so that it might become possible to live in true unity with our brothers and sisters.

Allow me, then, to conclude with this final thought.

Psalms 133, verse 1, talks of brothers dwelling in true unity. “Brother,” אחים in Hebrew, may refer to a range of relationships, from biological siblings to people groups. That is, the psalm demands that we choose with which brother, whether with Jack and Jill, with Maryland or Virginia, or with Korea and India, we want to dwell in unity.

What I have heard is that Washington Street UMC has prioritized your relationship with brothers and sisters across the way at Beulah and Roberts as a first step toward seeking a more perfect union among blacks and whites everywhere. I trust that this is a genuine commitment. It will need to be, because commitment to this cause will require unequal fervor, unequal earnestness, not a few tears and the rending of sackcloth, and sacrifice, even perhaps sacrifice of other brotherly relationships. Why? Because, for you to say to our black brothers and sisters, “Your life matters to me,” and to say with them for all to hear, “Black lives matter,” may mean that you can no longer stand with some of your brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers, friends and colleagues, bosses. But we must commit to this unequal and preferential option for Black lives, for, God knows, our black brothers and sisters, in their bodies and in their souls, have long suffered and suffer now an unequal share of the pain in the unholy name of anti-black racism upon which the supremacy of whites have been built.

And lest we think that this is not a Christian matter, that Christianity has been an antidote to the evil of racist ideology, that Christianity has remained unaffected, pure, and innocent to the corrupting influences of our nation's founding sin, let me give over the spotlight to two voices, first to a white contemporary Christian, Robert Jones, then the final to my American hero, Frederick Douglass:

Here is Jones summarizing his rigorous survey and statistical analysis of white Christianity and racism today:

“Harboring more racist views is a positive independent predictor of white Christian identity overall and for all of the three white Christian subgroups individually: white evangelical Protestant, white mainline Protestant, and white Catholic ... Attending church more frequently does not make white Christians less racist. On the contrary, there is a positive relationship between holding racist attitudes and white-Christian identity among *both* frequent (weekly or less) and infrequent (seldom or never) church attenders.”

Finally, here is Douglass:

“The slave prison and the church stand near each other. The clanking of fetters and the rattling of chains in the prison, and the pious psalm and solemn prayer in the church, may be heard at the same time. The dealers in the bodies and souls of men erect their stand in the presence of the pulpit, and they mutually help each other. The dealer gives his blood-stained gold to support the pulpit, and the pulpit, in return, covers his infernal business with the garb of Christianity. Here we have religion and robbery the allies of each other—devils dressed in angels' robes, and hell presenting the semblance of paradise.”

Brothers and sisters in the Lord Jesus Christ, let us not say “Peace, peace,” when there is no peace (Jer. 8:11). Let us not seek peace before there is peace for our brother and sister across the way and everywhere. So, to say and to seek such is not to declare nor to seek the peace our Lord gives. For the peace that Christ would us have, the peace that he gives, is not given as the world gives and comes only after the trauma of death, the deafening silence of Holy Saturday, and the mystery of resurrection by the power of the Spirit (John 14:26–27). Say and seek that peace, and we shall find along the way our brothers and sisters across the way already leading the way.

εἰρήνη ὑμῖν. (John 20:19) The peace of Christ be with you.

Amen

Bibliography:

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