***The King’s Notion of Justice***

*a sermon delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on June 15, 2025*

*based on I Samuel 8: 1-20*

Let me begin this with a quote from our new American, Chicago born, Pope whose rise to the chair of St. Peter amazes me and thrills me, and fills me with hope. You’ve probably all seen this; it’s made the rounds of social media. Pope Leo the XiV says …

“You cannot follow both Christ and the cruelty of kings. A leader who mocks the weak, exalts himself, and preys on the innocent is not sent by God. He is sent to test you. And many are failing.”

“You cannot follow both Christ and the cruelty of kings.” This is the most basic truth underlying the basic message of the Bible I can know. Let me unpack this …

There were two modes of justice in the Old Testament: one is the justice that comes out of Jerusalem where the royal elites and the power structure lived.

The second kind of justice is a justice that comes from God – a justice that is forever looking for ways to lift up the poor and forgotten. We see this preferential option for the poor over the ricj uttered in all the Old Testament prophets: Amos, Hosea, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Isaiah. All of them.

The justice that is identified with the power elites of Jerusalem claims to be from God, too. And it has its own liturgy, a liturgy uttered from the Jerusalem temple.

There are remnants of that liturgy in five of the Psalms of the Old Testament. And those are all psalms that use the phrase, “Yahweh, is king.” (Psalm 93, 96, 97, 98, and 99)

They say, “He” (it’s always He) established the world.” “He will never be moved.” “He will come to earth as a judge.” This male God/King is always identified with a particular imperial brand of “justice.”

Now, what I want to suggest to you is that we should be very suspicious of this liturgy of “justice,” because it is simply a recital of mindless mantras.

You know, it’s kind of ironic, the use of such mantras, because the people who care most about the flag and the pledge of allegiance to the flag, tend to be the people who are least interested in liberty and justice for all. They only want it for themselves and people who look just like them.

We should be suspicious of this liturgy on two counts. First of all, there is no specificity. These mantras don't spell anything out. It’s always just a patriotic, pious banner over which a king legitimizes and propagandizes his claim to have unbridled power; power given to him by God.

And the second reason I think we should be suspicious is that there's no human agency. It's just these powerful unbelievably rich people employing religious language, wrapping their wealth and privilege in God and the flag. It’s what yesterday’s Flag Day, Trump Birthday parade was all about.

Now, let me be fair, here and there in the Old Testament, hope is expressed that the king will actually do something about justice for the poor, but I don't think it amounted to very much.

I mean, if you look at King Solomon as a model, it's perfectly clear that King Solomon didn't have much interest in justice because, to support him and his rich friends, he taxed his regime into collapse.

Now, this morning’s text from 1st Samuel feeds my suspicion. The NRSV translates the opening phrase as, "These will be the ways of the king." Another version, the NIV translates, "This is what the king will do."

But what the original Hebrew says is, "This will be the king's mishpat.” “This will be the king's notion of justice."  The word justice is defined, then, by the following …

He will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and horsemen (that is the draft) and they will run before his chariots. He will appoint some as commanders of thousands and some to plow his fields and reap his harvest (that’s his income tax). And he will take your daughters, (think of “trophy wives” and concubines) to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields in your vineyards and your olive orchards, and give them to his entourage.

He will take one tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers.  He will take your servants and the best of your cattle and your donkeys, and put them to work, he will take one tenth of your flocks, and (this is a last verse) you shall be his slaves.

This is the king's Mishpat (justice); a “justice” that is 100% predatory.

The king’s regime is all about a massive transfer of wealth from common people to the urban elites who preside over the militarily guaranteed economy that has as its prime motive to ingratiate the wealth of the king’s family . Does this sound familiar?

This will be the king's Mishpat.

Now this kingly brand of “justice” always is exerted on the lowly (the bottom 85-95%) from above, and it is always justified as exerted for “the maintenance of order.”

Here is how late prophetic teacher, Walter Brueggeman, would put it today: he has said something to this effect: “In order to maintain order, you may need more police, or you may need to call out the National Guard, or you may want to declare martial law, or maybe all three, but whatever, it's all about the people of privilege growing their privilege.”

And there are still many people in our nation who just nod their heads in agreement when our president says we need more ICE police, when he says he needs to call out the National Guard even though local police and governors say that would merely incite violence.

I have no doubt those same citizens would even nod in agreement if when he or, next, if he encounters enough resistance to his daily attacks on free speech and democracy, he might say, “I hate to do this but we just have to impose martial law and lock down the whole country, suspend the courts, circumvent the laws and governance of individual sovereign state governments, and suspend the rule of law itself. I have no doubt they will say, “Well God himself this man for just this time, this time just before Jesus comes back himself to bring history to an end. The end times calls for these extreme measures. Make no mistake, this is exactly how a significant percentage of the population of our country thinks just now.

Yes, and in answer to this, Pope Leo XiV who, I believe was summoned to his authority for just such a time as this said the words I began with …

“You cannot follow both Christ and the cruelty of kings. A leader who mocks the weak, exalts himself, and preys on the innocent is not sent by God. He is sent to test you. And many are failing.” (Pope Leo XIV)

Amen