

## “The Days Are Surely Coming”

Luke 18:1-8; Jeremiah 31:27-34 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn  
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*Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might trust in your faithfulness and care, your justice and your mercy. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

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If you've been paying attention, you know that this story of the persistent widow is one of my favorite stories that Jesus tells. But it occurred to me this week that just reading this whole passage all at once on a Sunday morning doesn't really do the story justice. With nothing more than the slightest breath between verse three and verse four, we don't really experience the point of the story, the persistence and patience and sheer doggedness with which the widow is pursuing her justice. What if we approached this story another way? What if today, we had just read the first three verses: *Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. He said, "In a certain city, there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, 'Grant me justice against my opponent.'"*

And then every Sunday, we would repeat a shortened version of verses two and three again at some point in the service: "There was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. There was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, 'Grant me justice against my opponent.'" How many weeks would you imagine we should repeat those lines to really get the point? Six? Nine? Three months? A year?

Presumably, this story comes up in the lectionary every time it uses the gospel of Luke, so maybe we should start today, and in three years, when the story comes up again, we'd be really ready to feel the true impact of this story.

She “kept coming to him and saying, ‘Grant me justice against my opponent.’” “Grant me justice against my opponent.” “Grant me justice against my opponent.” When you stretch it out like this, you start to wonder what else is going on in the background of this story. Is she coming weekly? Daily? If she, a widow, has not been granted justice, how is she making ends meet? Has the community stepped up to make sure she's fed and protected? Or is she gradually becoming more and more gaunt and weak as the months go by?

It turns out it's not just the hurry in which the story moves along that is obscuring things here. The English translation is softening things up for us. In verses four and five, we read about the judge's eventual response: “For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, ‘Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.’” But “wear me out” doesn't sound like that big of a deal, does it? If you look down at text note *d*, you'll see that it says: *Or so that she may not finally come and slap me in the face.* The English Standard Version gets a little closer, saying, “I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by

her continual coming.” The New International Version does a better job, saying, “I will see that she gets justice, so that she won’t eventually come and attack me!”

The commentary in my study Bible aims to correct the discrepancy this way, calling the NRSV wording a “weak translation for ‘lest she continue coming and end up doing violence to me!’” It continues, “the point is that, according to societal norms, this widow should simply have accepted her fate; by refusing to do so, she acts so out of character that the judge is astonished.” Apparently he is astonished to the point that he’s not sure she won’t turn violent!

It seems this widow is not ashamed to make a spectacle of herself. She is so invested in getting justice that she has rejected the proper channels, stopped worrying about whether it’s her turn or not, and committed herself to just keep shouting. We are told nothing about what injustice was done to her and nothing about the “opponent” or “adversary” she’s demanding justice from. Those details are not the point. Jesus is holding this shameless woman up as a model of faithfulness, because she has stopped letting the conventions of her society hold her back from crying out for the justice she knows should be hers.

Can you imagine that kind of faithfulness? Where you are no longer concerned about what people think of you, or the “right” way to do things, or whether you’re inconveniencing someone to do what’s right? And not just for a moment, but for weeks, or months, or years? How long would you withstand people

whispering about you and your ill-conceived campaign to set things right? It's one thing to have a moment of bravery and defy social conventions in order to make a scene and get something put right. It's a whole other thing to keep doing it repeatedly, loudly, annoyingly – in the face of people telling you to just give up and acquiesce, that justice isn't for people like you – until you finally, finally break down the barriers that kept justice constrained. This is faithfulness, Jesus says. Sometimes it's just keeping on doing the thing, no matter what. Even if you don't really believe justice will come. But because you know that justice should come.

I saw something on the internet yesterday that was a bit alarming. It was remarking that therapists are reporting a new trend among the folks they are working with: apparently increasing numbers of people are struggling because they can't imagine the future; they have nothing to look forward to. Now, we have a somewhat bizarre relationship with the passage of time in the church, but I think there might be a gift here that we could offer people. We talk here about living in “the already and the not-yet.” We talk about God's vision for the flourishing of creation, not because we think it's arriving fully born tomorrow, but because it helps us orient our lives toward a different way of being in the world. When we have trouble picturing the future, we have these sacred texts to turn to, to remind us what it can and should look like. That is a gift we can offer the world, something sorely needed, if we can find ways of introducing it that avoid superficial positivity or platitudes.

I love this passage we read from Jeremiah, because it's almost as if even God really needs to paint a picture of how things could be different. Can you hear the desperate love in these verses? "I will make a new covenant," God insists. These verses read like God is weary, exhausted by the destruction, the generational suffering that the people have been going through. If we just knew each other better, if each and every one of you had my covenant in your heart, surely it would work better. Your sins would be forgivable. We could build and plant together, instead of this constant uprooting and overthrowing. The days are surely coming. *The days are surely coming.*

Did that widow have God's covenant in her heart? I believe she did. I believe that she believed the days are surely coming. And indeed, for her, they did. God has a vision for the flourishing of creation, and it includes us; it includes all of humanity. God is calling us to faithfulness, to enter into that new covenant, by welcoming it into our hearts and living by it. We are not bound by societal conventions that assume some are more worthy of justice than others. We are not bound to be quiet and polite in the face of corrupt systems that routinely deny justice to those who have been wronged. The days are surely coming. Sometimes it is hard to believe that. Sometimes it seems as though the whole game is rigged, and likely always has been, and there's nothing anyone can or will do to fix it. Sometimes it seems as though the things we thought we could rely on are suddenly all crumbling around us, leaving us

nothing steady to stand on. But that new covenant is already here. It is already in our hearts. “The days are surely coming,” it whispers to us. Faithfulness is when we live as though we believe it.

I saw something else yesterday, in addition to that distressing meme. Yesterday afternoon at Regional Gathering, I attended a workshop led by Jose Martinez from New Church Ministries. He was introducing us to the idea of “protopia,” which is an alternative to a dystopia (which is clearly bad) or a utopia (which is simply unrealistic). A “protopia” is simply a place, a realm of influence, a microcosm where progress is being made, gradually, continually. Now, we argued with Jose in this workshop, pointing out that the current level of brokenness in the world and in the church seems to demand more than gradual, incremental progress. And he didn’t exactly say this, but I’m pretty sure what he was trying to show us with all the data he shared is that all progress is incremental, because we’re dealing with humans, and humans most often only change slowly.

But what was amazing is that later that day, I experienced a microcosm of protopia. As I hope you already know, our Regional church is multi-lingual. The number that was mentioned this weekend, of how many different languages the people of the Pacific Southwest Region speak, was nine. That’s a lot. That’s especially a lot when you’re trying to plan worship for something like yesterday’s Regional Gathering. I have been in that position before. There are always new ideas

about how to incorporate multiple languages into the worship services. Over the years, people have come to expect such experiences, which has broadened the range of possibilities, because we no longer have to assume someone will go away mad if they didn't understand every word. So lots of things have been tried.

But yesterday, I saw this done the best I've ever experienced. It was towards the end of the service, in a song we sang after the offering. Now, the background to this song is that unlike in previous Regional get-togethers, the "band" was not just a group from one church. It was musicians from multiple different congregations, some of whom were native Spanish-speakers and at least one of whom was a native Korean-speaker. Rather than just doing songs one congregation's praise team was familiar with, they had clearly been working together for a while to bring songs that incorporated multiple traditions. This song of thanksgiving was the culmination of that. I couldn't sing it for you now, and I'm not even sure it would make sense to try to reproduce it here. The song focused on the words "Thank you," in four different languages: Arabic, Korean, English, and Spanish. The chorus was "thank you" in each of those languages, and then there were verses that were sung like a responsive reading, where the song leader whose language it was would read a line like "For the beauty and wonder of creation" and then we would all respond by singing "thank you" in the matching language. It was lovely. I have never seen a song in multiple languages weave them together so effectively and seamlessly, including the

congregation so effortlessly. It was, indeed, a glimpse of protopia, a vision of the church doing multicultural, multilingual worship in the most beautiful way imaginable. The days are surely coming. Every once in a while, they are here. We must keep singing. We must keep shouting for justice. We must keep planting these seeds for a more beautiful future. We must live in ways that insist to a world that is increasingly convinced it's dying that the days are surely coming! Hallelujah and Amen!