

## Sermon: A Long Obedience, in the Same Direction

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St Giles Presbyterian Church, March 21, 2021)

Power and Politics is a signature TV program of CBC News Network, hosted by a very capable journalist Vassy Kapelos. The program delves into political issues of the day, whether Canadian or abroad. It interviews persons responsible for the issues, and assemble panels of experts to debate and to offer their opinions. The sharp witted program host often quips about her geekiness in paying particular attention to details that people normally miss. The show is highly entertaining and has drawn a loyal following, including myself.

Not too long ago, the show zeroed in on the vaccine procurement effort of the Federal Government, particularly on the lack of domestic manufacturing capability. While the Canadian government regularly boasts about having purchased the most diversified portfolio of COVID-19 vaccines, they are all manufactured outside of Canada. Seizing on this oversight or a lack of long-range planning, the opposition parties pounced on the Government, “What is the Plan-B?” In case if and when the flow of these life-saving vaccines is interrupted, for whatever reasons — be it vaccine nationalism, increasing international competition, or retooling of manufacturing processes, as we saw recently in both Pfizer and Moderna. Does the Federal Government have an effective response? Or should Canadians simply sit at home, wait even more patiently while twiddling their thumbs? What and where is the Plan-B?

It would seem to me that on the critical issue of vaccine procurement, having a Plan-B is a really wise thing to do. Lacking it exposes the government’s fundamental shortcoming of reacting simply to the latest crisis, and of not having a vision nor a plan for the longer term. So let me put to you this question of faith, on the issue of salvation, is Christ Jesus dying on the cross God’s Plan-B?

This question needs to be asked as we reflect on the Scripture text of Jeremiah 31:31, “*The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah.*” The reason, we are told, is due to the fact that people of Israel broke and had continued to break the covenant they made with God. In last week’s sermon, we had discussed one such example. Even though God, out of

steadfast lovingkindness, provided deliverance again and again to the people, the tragic fact is that the unfaithfulness (or sinfulness) of the people of God never really stopped. The inadequacy of the Sinai covenant was plainly exposed.

Then a solution seemingly emerged, the problem could lie in the system of government. If we should be ruled by an earthly king, just like our neighbouring nations, pleaded the people. God relented and gave in to the people of God their earthly kings. After the initial fumble in Saul, out came David, the shepherd turned king, who searched after God's own heart. God was so pleased with David that God made another covenant with him, that the line of David will always sit on the throne. Davidic kings were supposed to rule with justice, in peace and righteousness. Yet, once again, human sinfulness got in the way. The united kingdom soon broke into two — the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah. Reading the chronicles of those subsequent kings, with the exception of a few rare good ones, the most consistent tagline would seem to be: so and so did evil in the eyes of the Lord, more evil than his father did. One gets a clear impression of a downward trajectory in terms of covenantal faithfulness.

Prophets were raised by God to counter this downward trajectory of both kings and people. Their primary role was not to predict the future, it was to bring the people of God back onto the righteous path, back to covenantal faithfulness to God. They discharged their duty valiantly (well the true prophets did), but to no avail. By the time of Prophet Jeremiah, the entire system of Monarchy was so broken, faithless and corrupt, it teetered on the brink of total collapse.

That was when God raised the hope of a new covenant in Jeremiah chapter 31 in verse 33, *“But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.”* A new covenant carved not onto stone tablets, written not onto paper parchments, but onto the very own hearts of the people of God. A new covenant that God will forgive the iniquity of God's people, and remember their sin no more. A new covenant that will eventually be realized in the life and work of a particular descendant of David, Jesus of Nazareth, in his death, his resurrection, and his glorification.

So let me put that same question back to you, as earlier: is Christ Jesus dying on the cross God's Plan-B? Before we could answer that

question, we are missing another key piece, that is the life and work of Melchizedek.

Who or what is Melchizedek? In the Bible, Melchizedek appeared very briefly, and very early — in the time of Abram before his name was changed by God to Abraham. His story is recorded in Genesis 14:18-20, three short verses in all, yet his impact is truly profound. At that time, Abram and his men had just emerged victorious from a fierce battle against five local kings. On the way home, Melchizedek king of Salem met him and brought bread and wine.

The Hebrew name Melchizedek literally means ‘my king is righteousness’. Salem, having the same consonants in Hebrew as ‘Shalom’, could be translated as peace. So Melchizedek, king of righteous from the city of peace, met Abram on the road with bread and wine. A prototype of the Eucharist, perhaps? The Bible further informs us that he was priest of God Most High. So this priestly king met Abram and blessed him, saying “*Blessed be Abram by God Most High, maker of heaven and earth; and blessed be God Most High, who has delivered your enemies into your hand!*” It was a blessing and a reminder to Abram, to give praise and glory to God in all things. In response, Abram gave him one-tenth of everything.

Many Biblical scholars have long drawn association of this priestly king to Jesus Christ. I think my favourite allusion comes from Heidi Haverkamp, an author and Episcopal priest, describing Melchizedek as ‘Jesus peekaboo’, sort of a glimpse of Jesus in the Old Testament, teasing our senses, whetting our appetite.

That allusion is further strengthened in Psalm 110, a Psalm of David, who described the coming of a kingly and messianic figure, serving the priestly role ‘according to the order of Melchizedek’ (Psalm 110:4). The author of the Book Hebrews further connected the dots in chapter 5, in describing the priestly office of Christ. Christ is the begotten Son of God, he is appointed by God to the office of high priest in the line of Melchizedek. Instead of serving simply as the intermediary between God and people, Christ also offered himself up through suffering. His submission to God was made perfect by his sacrifice on the cross, thus becoming the source of salvation for all who obey.

We now have all the information to answer the question I posed earlier. Jesus Christ was never the Plan-B. Through progressive revelations, we come to know Christ as a prophet, speaking God’s words to

us. We come to know Christ as a priest, interceding on our behalf. We come to know Christ as a king, ruling all aspects of our lives in righteousness and peace. He is the new covenant written in our hearts. Yet, his death on the cross had been God's masterplan all along. Hallelujah, praise be to God, God's faithfulness endures forever.

How then should we respond to this long faithfulness of our God? Might I suggest by 'a long obedience, in the same direction'. It happens to be the title of a book written by Eugene Peterson, the fame American author and theologian, who also wrote The Message version of the Bible. Peterson wrote 'A Long Obedience, in the Same Direction' originally in 1997. The book is recently revised and republished in 2017. In the 20th Anniversary Preface, the author explained that he was urged by many to 'stay current', so he updated illustrations, changed a few celebrity names (as celebrities change pretty rapidly), and even utilized a fresh translation of the Holy Scripture (that is The Message version). Yet the basic thrust of the book didn't change — that is God doesn't change: he seeks and he saves. And our response to God as he reveals himself in Jesus Christ doesn't change: we listen and we follow, or we don't.

In the book, Peterson explains the two useful designations for people of faith — that is disciple and pilgrim. Disciple says we are people who spend our lives apprenticed to our master, Jesus Christ, in a growing and learning relationship. Pilgrim tells us we are people who spend our lives going someplace, going to God, and whose path for getting there is the way, Jesus Christ. We realize that 'this world is not my home', and set out for the Father's house

Utilizing Psalm 120 to 134 as template, also known as the Psalms of Ascend, Peterson outlines the starting point of a Christian life as first recognizing we are in trouble, by ourselves. It ends with an invitation to bless God, to lift up our praising hands, to the Holy Place, and to bless God. In between, in our journey home, through all trials and tribulations, the Triune God walks with us, accompanies us, sustains us, steadfastly, faithfully. It's a fascinating book, one that I am still reading, I plan to share with the Friday Bible Study group in time, and I invite all of you to join in this study. Let me end this sermon with the passage in Psalm 134:2-3, "*Lift your praising hands to the Holy Place, and bless God. In turn, may God of Zion bless you—God who made heaven and earth!*"

**In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.**