

Green Olives

I would like to begin this time together with a quiz. What is your favorite pizza topping?

According to Huffington Post, here are the top 10 pizza toppings in 2022 for the United States.

10. Spinach
9. Pineapple
8. Green Peppers
7. Black Olives
6. Extra Cheese
5. Bacon
4. Sausage
3. Onions
2. Mushrooms
1. Pepperoni

Much to my dismay, my favorite topping is not in the list at all. It's green olives. Is there anyone here that loves green olives on their pizza? How about loving green olives in general? I love green olives.

Now my youngest daughter, Hannah, who just turned 26 would never eat them. Until July 4 when I made a pasta salad with stuff I found around the house. So there was pasta, red onion, feta cheese, Greek dressing and green olives. Hannah shared with me that she ate the pasta salad and that she "didn't mind the green olives." which in the world of picky eater Hannah is high praise indeed.

So why am I talking about green olives? The green olive tree is mentioned in our scripture for this morning and we will get to its meaning in a minute and yes, there really is a reason we are talking about green olives this morning.

We are looking at Psalm 52 this morning. And all the commentaries say that in order to understand Psalm 52 you have to go back to 1 Samuel 22.

In 1 Samuel 22, we find David on the run from King Saul and David has found safety in the house of Achimelech, the priest of Nob. Saul is threatened by David and never ever calls David by name but simply calls him "The son of Jesse". Saul is out to kill David and is sending out informants to find him.

Meanwhile, David is joined by a group of people who believe in David. They are the distressed, the indebted and the discontent and David becomes their leader. David's personal force is made up of those who are marginal or outcast in society.

An informant named Doeg the Edomite finds out where David is hiding and let's Saul know. Saul is livid and sends Doeg out to massacre 85 priests and many more men, women, children and animals in the city. Even though it is Saul's massacre, David claims responsibility because it is out of Saul's anger that so many lost their lives. So now we look at Psalm 52 in light of that story from 1 Samuel 22, because David is writing this psalm and the words are directed toward Doeg the Edomite, the one who carried out the massacre.

David begins this Psalm by asking how the mighty could boast of how corrupt they are. And after he laments the violence done by men such as Doeg, David warns these oppressors of their inevitable defeat. He talks about how God protects the oppressed and avenges them.

Now, I am aware how familiar that sounds to some of you who have come from different churches, that God is a vengeful God. Its familiar and it's a tired image that vengeful evildoers have relied on to justify oppression for thousands of years. But there is another image of vengefulness that doesn't justify oppression, but empowers liberation.

Imagine the vengeance of a mother against those who harm her children. That's a better starting point for imagining the vengeance of God. The prophet Hosea identified this image when he described God as a mother bear; robbed of her cubs, who attacks the perpetrators and rips their hearts out.

It's this kind of God that David has in mind when they sing against their oppressors in verse 5. So God will put you down to the ground forever; sweep you away, leave you ruined and homeless and uprooted from the land of the living! This is a vengeance that favors and defends the mistreated. It's rooted in justice, not oppression.

And then to contrast this uprooting, David proclaims, But I am like a green olive tree flourishing in God's house.

Olive trees held a sacred significance in ancient Judaism, providing olive oil for various ceremonies. Midrash Tanchuma describes how they used the high-grade olive oil from the first pressing for the lamps in the temple, while they used the low-grade oil from the second and third pressing for the anointed meal. The Midrash asks, "Why olive oil and not any other kind of oil? And the Rabbi answers, "Because the olive oil is the symbol of light in the world."

The olive tree represented a special connection between God and God's people. When David says in Psalm 18, "It is you who light my lamp, my God. The metaphor is a reference to the oil from the olive tree provided by God to keep the flame lit.

In 1 Chronicles 27:28 it shows David assigning soldiers to protect the olive and sycamore trees. When olive trees are protected from human destruction, they can last forever. Through the hottest summers and the coldest winters its leaves remain green. Olive trees can last thousands of years and are among some of the longest surviving trees in the world. In Lebanon, the “Sisters” are a grove of sixteen olive trees that, according to local legend, have survived for over 6,000 years. Folklorists even claim the trees are the source of the olive branch by the dove to Noah’s Ark.

So why does David use this imagery of the olive tree? He is trying to encourage the oppressed. While our oppressors are inevitably uprooted, God protects the oppressed. And like the Olive tree, when the oppressed are protected, they can survive forever. The heart of God is to protect and defend the oppressed, so when we protect and defend the oppressed, we reflect the image of God. Those actions are divine.

The oppressed are like an olive tree, who, when protected, will never be uprooted. The oppressors however, are doomed to be uprooted. And that uprooting is inevitable because the oppressors have unsettled roots to begin with.

Damon Garcia in his commentary on Psalm 52 says “Oppressors root themselves in conceptually opaque and unstable categories and then distinguish those categories as normative. He says “We see this with the fickle category of whiteness, for example, which remains elusive to maintain power over those deemed as non-white. Whiteness is doomed to be uprooted because it isn’t rooted in anything substantial or stable. The same goes for the elusive nature of the cisheteropatriarchy, that characteristically alters itself among different cultures and different time periods, based on the non-normative groups they dominate. Oppressors evolve in reaction to the evolution of the oppressed in order to cling to power.

One of the oppressors strategies for clinging to power is to make the oppressed think they don’t have tangible roots. As oppressed groups fight for their autonomy, the oppressors try to mischaracterize these groups as a phase that will vanish as quickly as they appeared. Isn’t that what they do to the LGBTQIA + community when they deny the long history of their existence across cultures and time periods? And when groups like Black Lives Matter take to the streets just for the right to drive a car in safety, the oppressors insist that they are being aggressive in their desire for autonomy. They assert this about Indigenous people fighting for autonomy, immigrants fighting for autonomy, women fighting for autonomy and workers fighting for autonomy. They refuse to acknowledge the history of the oppressed and the history of their struggle.

Paulo Freire talks about how the only way the oppressed can develop the education of their liberation is by discovering that the oppressors do not host the oppressed. Rather, it’s the oppressed who host the oppressors on these colonized and exploited lands.

Once that is understood, the oppressed can engage in the process of their liberation and build a new world.

The oppressors try to uproot the oppressed, without realizing that it is them, with their lack of substance and stability, who are doomed to be uprooted. The oppressed, their identity and their desire for autonomy has always been here, long before the present forms of oppression. Oppressor after oppressor is uprooted, again and again, like an olive tree in the house of God, we remain.

Oppressive policies continue to restrict our freedom, such as recent anti-trans bills, anti-indigenous bills and the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*. These are evil acts that make us say with the Psalmist “You forge wild lies all day long – your slanderous tongue is sharp as a razor! You love evil, not good; falsehood, not truth telling.

Our rage at injustice reflects God’s rage at injustice. Our rage is divine. And our grief is divine. And our fight for a different world is divine. Follow this divine rage within you and let it radicalize you and this community into action. Find someone to share your rage with and talk about what you can do together.

Our oppressors want us dead, but we are like a green olive tree in the house of God. Despite our oppressors’ best efforts to uproot us, we remain. There is a stubbornness to being like an olive tree. We refuse to wither away. We refuse to let them kill us. We posture ourselves with a bold and loud confidence even though they want us to shrink and stay silent.

In her book *A Brown Girl’s Epiphany*, Aurelia Davila Pratt talks about the moments where she is pressured to shrink herself to fit into the standards of “white and polite” culture. She asks “Is it just me? This sense that I need to be prim and proper and non-offensive based on the definitions set by southern, white Christians? This feeling that my existence is too loud? That I need to filter myself?” Pratt challenges us to pause in those moments where we are shamed and would typically apologize, quiet down and shrink. And in those sacred pauses she asks us to remember the truth of our being created in the image of God.

Like the green olive tree we must remember who we are, and stubbornly refuse to shrink ourselves. We are beloved by God. We must recognize that and commit to protecting and defending each other. Our liberation depends on it. Amen.