

Preacher: Audrey Hollenberg-Duffey

Scripture: Psalm 1

Today's sermon is one I intended to preach back in January before Anita decided to make her surprise early arrival. Since I already had it written, the goal then was to have one of our wonderful retired ministers read the sermon, but you all got snowed out that morning. Psalm 1 is a favorite of mine, so I felt it was worth looking back a little so we could still study this beautiful Psalm and its encouragement to be like trees. I have edited it to be more appropriate now that we have finished the Bible Read-through.

Trees are complex with intricate systems that allow them to grow and be nourished. Most of the work they do we cannot even see. They draw up water from their roots, convert sunlight into energy, take nutrients out of the soil and make oxygen from carbon dioxide. What we can see is the beauty they add when they flower or change colors in the fall. We can also see and enjoy the fruit they produce. The kind of trees that produce fruit are my favorite kinds of trees because they remind me of my family's old citrus farm in Florida. It was my favorite place to visit when we would spend Christmas in Florida. It was a place of nourishment for me, not just because of the fruit, which is best eaten right off the tree, but it's where I learned to fish, it's where I learned to drive, it's where I grew closer to my Hollenberg family. It was a place of learning for me.

The first Psalm is an orientation to the book of Psalms as it invites the readers to deeply root themselves in God's word as they continue to engage the rest of the book. It is like an introduction to the students who study this book. The Psalm describes two different ways we can approach life. The first way is to be like a tree planted by streams of water that receives regular and constant nourishment. The righteous person who is deeply rooted next to the streams of water is someone who delights in the Law of the Lord which allows them to prosper and flourish in all that they do. The other way to live is to be like the chaff — left over debris from harvesting wheat that is blown away by the wind. This is the exact opposite of being well rooted. The wicked are like chaff who are blown around by the world because they have been unable to sink their roots into a firm foundation. Students of the Psalms who continue to read and study would be like the trees deeply rooted by nourishing streams. Being rooted in a firm foundation is important.

“When planting a tree, landscapers take inordinate trouble to make sure the root-ball stays tightly packed and moist, that it gets into the right kind of soil and at the right depth. All kinds of damage can happen to the trunk or branches or leaves in transit, but as long as the roots are intact, there's hope for recovery and growth. If the roots are seriously damaged, the tree will probably die.”¹

Psalm 1 is a vision of vitality — an encouragement to be rooted in the best place possible. Trees planted by the stream have roots sunk into the best foundation. Even if there is a temporary drought, they will still be able to thirstily drink of the life-giving water. The tree's foundation is God's word. The more we, as trees, are immersed in scripture, the more we find the power for living. We come to know the source of living water.

Trees are often the subject of poetry. It was Joyce Kilmer who wrote a famous ode to a tree which included these words: “I think that I shall never see a poem as lovely as a tree ... / A tree that looks at God all day, / And lifts her leafy arms to pray; ... / Poems are made by fools

¹ homeliticsonline.com

like me, / But only God can make a tree.” This is the kind of tree that this Psalm is calling us to be; one that looks to God all day.

It’s true that trees live or die depending on their roots. It’s clear that we too, live or die according to how we are rooted in the things that matter. “Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers; but their delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law, they meditate day and night.” This word “happy” is sometimes translated “blessed.” Its meaning is one of calm contentment. Those who have a calm contentment know about the happiness that comes from trusting in God’s faithfulness in all seasons of life. The book of Jeremiah describes righteous persons as those who are so firmly rooted that their leaves will flourish in all seasons. Even in times of drought, they are able to endure anything that comes their way. There is not a season in life when they cannot bloom and produce good fruit.

Similarly, the book of Revelation talks about the tree of life with twelve kinds of fruit, fruit that never stops producing. Unlike other trees that have their seasons of production and then a season of recovery, the tree of life with its goal of healing the nations, will always be in bloom. This is possible because nothing “accursed” is allowed in the new heaven and new earth at the end of Revelation. Only the righteous will remain.

So, where do you get your water supply? As we read through the Bible there were times when we really had to work at it. To keep going took discipline, especially through some of the Old Testament and maybe also Revelation. As we read through the laws, did we really “delight in the Lord” like this Psalm invites us to? We often look at the “thou shalt” and “thou shalt not” as oppressive and restrictive. But for the Hebrews, the law and the Torah were a guide to life. This God-given structure and order to life are freeing. God’s order meant that in moments of chaos and upheaval, the people could always look to a God who was consistent and orderly. The alternative to the law was to sink your roots into a changing, self-centered culture and be like the chaff that is easily blown away by the wind. This is the way of the wicked.

The psalmist realized that there was a wrong way to live, one that was dependent on cultural values of pleasure, instant gratification and rugged individualism — values that may not be very foreign to us today. This is not a sustainable way to live. It is a surface living — one without roots. Without rootedness, the wicked cannot stand and will be blown away. The difficulty is discerning which voice is the wicked one. The voice of the wicked is not usually presented in an easy-to-discern form. This happens only in movies when the wicked wear dark, ominous colors and hiss, “I’ll get you my pretty and your little dog, too.” Too often, in the real world, wickedness conceals itself in attractive, appealing and comfortable clothing.

The only way to appropriately discern the way of the righteous from the way of the wicked is to be like the tree that is deeply rooted in the life-giving word of God. As the roots reach further and further into the rich soil, God’s nutrients allow us to experience and understand the way of the righteous because we can see it modeled by and demanded of God’s people.

Thomas Hibbs, a contemporary philosopher who teaches at Boston College, calls virtue “an acquired excellence of character that renders a person capable over the long haul of behaving in certain reliable ways.”² This is why it is so crucial to be planted by the ever-flowing stream of God’s word. This rootedness is what allows us to make decisions as persons walking in the way of righteousness over time. We, being made in God’s image and living regularly in God’s presence, can begin to emulate the righteousness of God. Not that we won’t occasionally fail, but over time, and through God’s gift of forgiveness, we can dig our roots deeper and deeper into

² homiletics.com

May 26, 2019 - Well Watered Trees

righteous living. The wicked will perish, says the psalmist, but the Lord watches over the way of the righteous. And as we walk that path of righteousness, we will be like the happy, contented trees that do not know death and decay, only life and life-giving nourishment. Having spent nine months deeply rooted in scripture and continuing to find ways to engage God's word, may we be like trees planted by streams of water, prospering because of the goodness of our Lord. Amen.