

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, June 11, 2023

Psalm 1

This morning we begin a new sermon series together. We've entitled it Psalms of Summertime, and I'm really, really excited for this series. It's been one that I've imagined we might do together for a while. I've told you before, if you've heard it I'm sorry, I've got to tell it again that the Psalms for me were my reintroduction to a practice of scripture reading. I was given a book as a gift for officiating a wedding. It was this beautiful book produced by Alabaster that put the Psalms to a different sort of print, not just the text that you'll see in your Pew Bible this day, and I started reading them daily. And for me it was incredibly important in rediscovering an appreciation for Holy Scripture, and not just that, but deepening my knowledge of scripture. So I'm really excited for us to spend the summer working through different Psalms. Let me grab this Bible real quick. I picked this up earlier this week when I was trying to get everything organized up here, and it reminded me of the first time I was introduced to the Psalms. Growing up in Greenville at John Knox Presbyterian Church in Greenville, South Carolina, we would do something called sword drills. Do you all know what those are? No. Okay, well in uh... Oh, some of y'all do! Yeah, yeah, okay, good. Some are shaking your heads yeah, so in some places this book is known as your sword, the spirit of God is your shield. I didn't know that at the time we were doing sword drills, but my Sunday School teachers growing up would...they would give us competitions, right? Krispy Kreme Donuts were the uh...what was on the line for us. And what they would do to start us out for Sunday School is they would call out a scripture, and we would have to turn to it really quickly. And the hack, if you will, is understanding that the Psalms are right there in the middle of the scripture, okay. So if you open it up and you are in the midst of the Psalms, you know you're about halfway in, and...and all you have to then figure out is 'Was the scripture that was named before or after the Psalms, right?' So this was the first hack, and we would never do sword drills for the Psalms because that was too easy, right? You would open it up and you'd be right there. So they were simply a means for me to the end of Krispy Kreme Donuts, okay, and we didn't spend a lot of time together studying their content. And so for me as I told you, it was that book produced by Alabaster that was the first thing to really truly introduce me to the depth and breadth of the Psalms. Brian Chung writes this. He says, "The book of Psalms is a collection of raw honest poems from thousands of years ago telling the story of humans and their desire to know God. The Psalms highlight for us the full range of emotional and spiritual experiences that we live through as human beings. So as we read them we learn together about mourning, grief, lament, but also love and joy, also forgiveness. Mostly we learn together what it means to connect with God in the midst of our very complex lives. The Psalms are a sprawling epic about our life with God in community in the midst of creation and with one another." So my hope is that over the next nine weeks or so, whether you get to be here in worship and we get to run out of bulletins, or whether you're joining us virtually wherever you find yourself as you vacation this summer, my hope is that we together might grow deeper in our knowledge of scripture together, but also in the way that we understand scripture communicating to us the depth and breadth of the human experience. This morning we will begin at the beginning with Psalm 1, but before I read from it I invite you to join me in a word of prayer.

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Surprise us, oh Spirit.

Surprise us as you did those gathered faithful people so many years ago at Pentecost.

Surprise us and open us to the voices that we have not paid attention to.

Open us to your word, to the way that it deeply connects with the complexity of our lives. Teach us something good and beautiful, faithful and worthwhile, as we study together. Let your Spirit fall fresh, and quiet within us any voice but your own that we might indeed hear your word for us this day. For we ask it in the name of the spirit that came at Pentecost and comes again this day. Amen.

Psalm 1

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.

They are like trees
planted by streams of water,
which yield their fruit in its season,
and their leaves do not wither.

In all that they do, they prosper.

The wicked are not so,
but are like chaff that the wind drives away.

Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,
nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous;
for the LORD watches over the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked will perish.

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of Our Lord endures forever. Amen.

So perhaps the first thing you might notice in this text and that I hope you will notice throughout our summer of studying these Psalms together is the beautiful and intricate and powerful imagery that the psalmist uses. Many of the Psalms that we will read together this summer will be attributed to David, some to unknown authors. Whoever it is that writes these poems, these songs, these hymns, they will come back to the well over and over to teach us with powerful images. In this one we begin with what the happy people look like. Then we move on to what the wicked will look like. The image of the tree planted by a river, this source of life, it grounds the text. It roots it. And then later we learned of chaff that are blown away, strewn by the wind.

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There is a way of the righteous that will be validated, protected by God, and there is a way of the wicked, which scripture tells us, will perish.

In these images we are invited to find our connection to the text itself. That's a thing. If you spend the summer trying to just study the words, you're not going to get out of this study what we intend for you to; but if you place yourself within the text, if you see yourself as a tree by a stream with flowing water that nourishes you and leaves that don't wither, and if you see yourself even perhaps as one who has walked in ways of sinfulness, who has sat in the seat of judgment, then maybe, just maybe, you will connect with the text in the way that the psalmist intends for you and for us to connect. Because what's interesting about the Psalms is that they are not a collection of wisdom from on high. These are not prophecy. These have not just fallen down onto the pen of the composer of the psalm. That's not what has happened here. It's not what we're going to read. What we get from the Psalms are hard earned nuggets of wisdom.

David didn't just wake up one day and write Psalm 1. David lived a life that revealed to him the truth of the text that we just read together. This is not divinely inspired prophecy for him, although indeed we believe the spirit was at work and is at work through it. This is scripture that represents the lived experience of the psalmist. After all, we are talking about David with this particular text; and if you know anything about the Holy Scripture and you know anything about David's story, then you know that he is one who has taken the advice of the wicked. He is one who has followed the path of the sinners. He is one who has sat in the seat of scoffers as well. You know the story of him sending his best soldier to the front line so that he might be killed, so that David might somehow claim that warrior's bride.

If you're unfamiliar, you can find it a little bit earlier if you do the sword drill, it's before the Psalms.

This is a man who is complicated, not one who sat in his pious suite and simply waited for the spirit to fall fresh.

I love this line about sitting in the seat of scoffers. We just heard that a few weeks ago, didn't we? At Pentecost when the spirit of God had fallen fresh upon the gathered masses and they had begun to speak in languages that were not their own and understand in languages that were not their own, it was about nine o'clock in the morning; but some people who witnessed it stood on the sidelines and said they're drunk, scoffing at the idea that the the Spirit of God might be working and moving through God's people.

A friend of mine shared a nugget of wisdom this week. "When you understand every opinion is a vision loaded with personal history, you will start to understand that all judgment is confession."

When you sit in the seat of a scoffer, you're saying a whole lot less about what it is or who it is you scoff at. You're saying a whole lot more about yourself, and David knows this as much as anyone. And, so, when he writes about chaff being scattered by the wind, he...he knows what

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that is. He knows what it means. This is not an either or thing for the psalmist here. It is a both and. He knows what it is like to live a life that feels dried up, to move through the world knowing that you don't have any new reserve, and ultimately he knows what it means and what it looks like to have all of that fall to the ground and then to have a wind take it away. And I don't know about you, but I would actually rather learn from someone who's really been there, who's really done it, than someone who's just imagined it. David has lived this life. He knows what it's like to be a sinner, to be wicked, to scoff, but he's also done something else. He also knows what it's like to position oneself nearest the river.

He knows the diligent faithful work that goes into that discipleship as well.

He knows that there is a way of moving through the world that will nourish us and sustain us; and when drought comes, when other trees wither and fail, there will be a sort of sustenance deep in the roots that will help one survive.

But he knows that it's not just done by personal will alone. That's what I love about the...the text here. Verse 3 says, "The wise—they are like trees planted by the streams of water which yield their fruit in its season. Their leaves do not wither. In all they do they prosper." You know what the tree didn't do? It didn't plan itself beside the river. They are like trees planted by the river. If we were to dig back into the Hebrew, we would understand that it's not...not the action of the tree, but the one who scatters the seed that plants them by the river, that gives them a place of sustenance and nourishment.

David knows what diligent and faithful work must go into this transformation, but he also knows that the grace of God is essential to growing in a way that will be sustainable, that studying scripture and reflecting together positions us very close to the river, but we're not planted there unless it be by God's grace alone. And it will be that Grace which will sustain us when we are parched, when we feel like we're about to wither up, when our roots don't feel as strong as they could.

I realized as I was reflecting on Psalm 1 this week, perhaps more than any other psalm it provides us with wisdom, but it also...it's actually an invitation for us, right here at the very beginning. We're about to spend nine weeks together moving through these psalms. We are going to learn about lament, that is communal in nature and personal in nature. We're going to learn about what it means to..to praise, to recognize God as king and queen, as most high Lord. We're going to learn also about what it means to give thanks throughout these next several weeks together. I believe that the psalmist here is inviting us...inviting us into a more intentional study of scripture than perhaps has been a part of our daily lives to this point. Maybe you wake up every day and spend quality time in the text, or maybe you're like I was just a few years ago, and if I'm being honest, you're like I am sometimes. You wake up with all sorts of good intention, but spending time together in scripture or spending time reflecting on scripture somehow gets taken out of the morning schedule. If that's you, maybe this is your invitation. Maybe it's an invitation

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from the psalmist themselves to spend time reflecting on the wisdom that can be found in the word of the Lord, or as the psalmist calls it, the law.

Perhaps we are not only being invited to spend time in scripture together but to trust that as we do that, the grace of God will be sufficient within us to grow some deeper roots into something that might nourish us when things get dried up and are difficult. Here's what I don't know. I don't know what it is that will attempt to wither your leaves. I don't know what wind or drought will befall you or maybe even has befallen you already, threatening to dry up and shrivel those roots, threatening to have you fall to the ground and be blown away with a brisk wind. I don't know what that is, but what I do know is that the psalmist promises us, promises us, that in the midst of that land wherever you find yourself, there is a river. There is a stream that gives life to the people of God. That as we spend time together and in God's word together, roots grow deeper that they might be nourished by a water that can never be exhausted. So my hope for you, for us is that we might feel invited to draw ever closer to the spirit of God at work, and not just not just that but also ever closer to the Word of God. Make a commitment maybe this morning. Make a commitment to spend time in the Psalms. Maybe it's a psalm that you hear preached, or maybe you start your own practice, but hear the psalmist this morning as an invitation, an invitation to be planted by the grace of God, to be nourished and to grow ever stronger in your discipleship of Jesus Christ.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, one God, Mother of us all. Amen.