

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, July 30, 2023

So throughout this summer we have endeavored in a sermon series we've entitled Psalms of Summertime. Each week we have reflected upon, learned from, a different Psalm, each of them having a different thing to offer us. This morning we reflect on a Psalm of Wisdom. A Psalm of Wisdom. It's gonna be Psalm 119. Maybe you brought your Bibles with you this morning or you want to grab your pew Bible. You can do that at this time, and we'll read from that in just a moment. But before we do, let us go to God together in prayer.

Let us pray.

Sweet Spirit, fall fresh...fall fresh upon us as your gathered people this day.
Fall fresh that we might hear your word for us with new ears, softened hearts, opened minds.
Bring your sweetness amongst us in this community that we might hear and we might respond to your graciousness and your love. For we ask it in the name of Jesus Christ. And all God's people say together—Amen.

So it's verses 1 through 16 of Psalm 119, this Psalm of Wisdom for us this day.

Psalm 119: 1-16

Happy are those whose way is blameless,
who walk in the law of the Lord.

Happy are those who keep his decrees,
who seek him with their whole heart,
who also do no wrong,
but walk in his ways.

You have commanded your precepts
to be kept diligently.

O that my ways may be steadfast
in keeping your statutes!

Then I shall not be put to shame,
having my eyes fixed on all your commandments.

I will praise you with an upright heart,
when I learn your righteous ordinances.

I will observe your statutes;
do not utterly forsake me.

How can young people keep their way pure?

By guarding it according to your word.

With my whole heart I seek you;
do not let me stray from your commandments.

I treasure your word in my heart,
so that I may not sin against you.

Blessed are you, O Lord;

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teach me your statutes.
With my lips I declare
all the ordinances of your mouth.
I delight in the way of your decrees
as much as in all riches.
I will meditate on your precepts,
and fix my eyes on your ways.
I will delight in your statutes;
I will not forget your word.

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

The psalmist begins this Psalm with the reassurance that there is happiness to be found in studying the word of God. “Happy are those,” the psalmist says, “who walk in the law of the Lord. Happy are those who delight in the Lord's decrees. Happy are those who seek the Lord with their whole heart.” It begins with the happiness and the joy that can be found in scripture and in studying it and knowing it, and then he ends...he closes that 16th verse with the promise to God that the psalmist will not forget the word of the Lord.

Oh, to have the study habits of this psalmist. To spend as much time as it seems the psalmist spends in scripture with God, to delight in all of the things that we read in Holy Scripture, and not just to delight but then to walk in the ways that are laid out in scripture and to do so blamelessly. Oh, to be the psalmist.

You know it's part of my job to study scripture. There's only a few of us that actually get a salary for doing that, but we do.

And even for me, uh, it is something that I've had to grow into. I've told y'all before that actually the Psalms were my entry point into studying scripture in a more robust and relevant way for me and started really simply. It actually kind of remains in that place, but the joy of getting to preach every week, or many weeks actually, is that I get to spend more and more time in scripture; and sometimes that is laborious and sometimes it is life-giving; and over time—almost 15 years of ministry—over time I've learned a whole bunch of stories. I remember... okay, I thought that was a mic for a second, okay...um over 15 years of ministry and getting to preach a whole bunch and learning a whole bunch of stories, I've gotten to learn scripture. I remember early on in my first New Testament class in seminary, I remember some of my Baptist sisters and brothers when we began to read these stories together in scripture, they would...they knew them already, and I was amazed at their wisdom. They were able to, uh, to complete a story if someone—if the professor—asked a question about a particular Parable, one of those friends who has spent a whole lot of time in their tradition learning scripture, they would raise their hand and they would explain it, explain the text; and I was in awe of my classmates. Over time I've been happy to kind of grow my...my understanding of scripture. But if I told you that...that it takes up the most space in my mind or in my memory, I'd be lying to you. I was thinking this week as I reflected on the

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psalmist talking about all the wisdom that we gain from knowing scripture, I was thinking about a going away party for a dear friend of mine, who left Memphis a couple months ago. Mary and I were actually at that going away party together. It was just a small dinner party for my friend. We sat around a table and we broke bread together. Each of us had brought something different. We drank good wine and we laughed and we told stories, and then my friend went around and kind of said why each of the people at the table were important, and then we were to go from the table to play a card game. We were going to play Apples to Apples—y'all probably know what that is, right?

Um, but people didn't go straight to where we were supposed to play the card game. Instead we went to the kitchen and just kind of stood there for a while, and it was evident after about 10 minutes that the one guy who wanted to play the card game wasn't getting any company. So we said what are we going to do instead of playing cards, and we went out on the back porch, and our friend has a beautiful voice. And so she said, "Why don't we sing something?" And so I pulled out my phone and pulled up the karaoke version of um...of a song that she loved to sing, and she started to sing it. We spent about... almost two hours on that back porch as she sang. You know, Mary's got an incredible voice too, so she joined in as well, singing some of those songs. It was everything from Jolene, to uh to Marvin Gaye, um to Taylor Swift—we'll get to that in just a second—and uh my friend just sang and we just listened, and it was this gift, actually, just to be in that kind of screened-in porch on an early summer night together and to listen. But here was the amazing part. I was kind of the DJ, and I was pulling up all these songs, and what I would do is I'd pull up the karaoke version on YouTube, and that means that it would be only instrumental, but the words come across the screen, right? So I was sitting right beside my friend. I kind of put the phone up on my leg so she could see all the words, and it was like two songs in when she's like, "Put that away." She didn't need the words to the song. For almost two hours she sang this vast array of songs she had never...that I wasn't prepping her for. There wasn't a playlist, but every song would come on, and she would jump right into it. And if there was a...a word or a phrase that she didn't know when we started out, Mary would, or another friend would pop in and would help her sing the song. And what I realized was that I knew a lot of the words that she knew as well, and the reason why I thought about that this week is because I thought about how much of my mind and my memory are taken up by songs.

if you turn on a 90s country station, and I'm in the truck with you,...we're gonna know every word of every song together. Right? Might be about a pickup or a dog or an ex-girlfriend or whatever it is, we're gonna know all the words, right? So here's, here's what I want to do just imagining together. I want us to do a little bit of a social experiment this morning if y'all will allow me to do that, okay? It's going to take some participation though, okay, so if you're...if you came in this place with a little bit of weight on you, we need you to, um, as Taylor would say, we need you to "shake that off," okay? All right, we need...that way—I know, I know. It's embarrassing. I don't care. So, um, all right, we need you, we need you to get rid of that for yourself. And then, uh, here's what I'm gonna do. I'm gonna read, uh, the beginning or I...I might even sing, we'll see...the beginning of a song and then I need you, I'm gonna point to you, and y'all are behind me, right, but I'm going to point to y'all, and y'all are just gonna say, uh, the

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phrase where I've...I've left off. Does that work for you? Okay, you don't have to sing it on pitch. That's okay, you can just yell it. That's fine.

All right, you ready? This one...this one's gonna need some Courtney help, some Robert help, anyone else who's been to the Airs tour. Um, I actually got some down here too. Yeah, all right, ready. This is really...this is...we're starting with the easy one. It's me. Hi,... (congregation responds) Yes.

All right, this one's a little different, uh, "Ain't no mountain high, ain't no valley low, ain't no River....(congregation responds)

Uh-huh.

(congregation keeps on responding)

You can keep going...yeah, yeah. "Operator, won't you put me on through. I gotta send my love down to...(congregation responds)... There we go. it's not that far down the road, y'all. Uh, "I have a bunch of x's, and they all live" where?... (congregation responds)... That's right. It's actually not true, but that's all right. Um not, it doesn't just work with songs, right? Uh, it also works with movie lines where you do two, actually, incidentally uh two Tom Cruise Lines here—"I feel the need...(congregation responds)... That's right, uh and then this is a more of a ...a strong statement, uh, "I want the truth '...(congregation responds)...That's exactly right.

Now here's what I want you to imagine. How much of your memory is taken up by music and movie lines? How much of your memory is even taken up, maybe, even by things that you've said to your friends or had said to you? How much of your memory is...is taken up by beautiful lines of poetry that you have committed to memory or by a book quote that you just can't get out of your head? How much of your memory is taken up by all those sorts of things? And then, how much of your memory is committed to knowing scripture?

It's not a question to make you feel guilty. It's a question to let you know that we have the ability, when we desire to, to commit things to our memory. And the psalmist in Psalm 119 tells us that there is joy to be found in the word of the Lord, and not just joy, but there's a...there's a way of moving through the world when we're following the decrees, the decrees that aren't just a general in nature, but we might also know specifically. We might remember together and have committed to our memory what it is that Jesus says. When somebody says what is the greatest commandment, we might remember together that it is to love the Lord with all our heart and our mind, our soul and our strength; and then there'll be a second part too—it is to love our neighbors as ourselves, right?

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The psalmist's message is that we ought to fill our minds with good and valuable things, and I would posit to you that good music that encourages your soul is a good thing to fill your mind with, and so is a wonderful line from poetry, and so is a powerful movie line maybe even,

but that also scripture has a chief place amongst those things, that scripture has a way of nurturing us, of encouraging us, of challenging us. And I would tell you that in moments when you need to be nurtured, when you need to be healed, when you need to be encouraged, it's a whole lot better to have some things committed to memory than to open up that Bible and to start thumbing through it to find something. Because, here's the thing y'all, there's also plenty that's not going to be very encouraging to you. It's not going to heal your soul when you need it, right? It might challenge you when you need healing; it might make you mad and you really need a word of peace; but we see the power of God's word at work even in God's word. Last week we baptized the baby here, and it made me think about Jesus just after his baptism. The spirit leads Jesus out into the...where?

(congregation responds)

Yeah, into the wilderness. And there Jesus is tempted, and Jesus doesn't just have a couple of quick lines for the devil in the wilderness. What does Jesus do? Jesus repeats scripture back to the devil—three texts from Deuteronomy—8:3, 6:13, and then 6:16. Those are from the Gospel of Matthew when Jesus repeats these words back. Scripture, actually, when we commit it to who we are, commit it to our memory, when we can draw upon it when we need it, it actually can help direct our lives. It can keep us in ways, as the psalmist says, “ways of purity.”

It's a word that might be loaded for you. And that's okay. Maybe just imagine that there are guard rails, and...and there's a healthy and good way, things that will...will help nurture your heart and your soul and your spirit, and scripture can actually help us remain between those guard rails. I know for myself I need Scripture, scriptural reminders, all the time, especially when I'm angry with somebody.

Especially when I'm angry with somebody. Maybe y'all are familiar with Matthew 18. Are y'all familiar with this? If not, this would be a great section of scripture that you might commit to memory. Um, there's, it's actually a...it's a really helpful outline of what it looks like to go and to confront someone that you have had a disagreement with, that maybe you have sinned against, or they have sinned against you, and to go, and it actually outlines this really helpful and healthy way of...of living into our discipleship of Jesus Christ even through conflict.

We're not mad at somebody, and then something bad doesn't happen to them, or even something good happens to them. It's helpful for me to be reminded of one of the first things that Jesus did. There was a person in need of healing, and Jesus takes all the... the negativity and the evil in that person and...and throws all of that into a herd of...do you all know? (congregation responds) Swine, yeah. And then what happens to those swine? They go off a cliff. Yeah, I love this. They go off a cliff. Yeah, yeah, and then what happens is that people get angry and want to hurt Jesus,

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and what that for me, reminds me of, it reminds me that the people are mad at what it costs them for a man to be healed. The people are mad that a herd of swine have been thrown off a cliff, because it cost them something for this person to be healed.

One of the reasons we did this sermon series is because our hope is that over a couple months you might have nine, ten Psalms that you might commit to some part of yourself.

I didn't read all of 119 because it's too long probably to commit to memory, but 16 verses isn't.

And what this was, hopefully, the series was hopefully going to accomplish, was that when you needed words around being thankful, you might go back and listen to Joshua's sermon from a couple weeks ago. You might memorize that psalm.

When you needed to comfort somebody, you might go back to the...the message last week, and you might commit Psalm 13 to memory and reflect it back to them. When you needed to be able to articulate your praise in a way that seems beyond your words, you might reflect back to God the words of the psalmist.

The psalmist is telling us that there is something within scripture that can bring about joy within our spirits, that can help us to live a more faithful life, encourage us when we need it, challenge us when it's necessary, heal us with a word.

There is much wisdom to be found in many different places in this world. The book that we call, the library that we call the Bible is not the only place to find wisdom, but it is certainly a very good place for those who call upon the name of Christ to begin. So here's my challenge to you. My challenge is that you might devote time—I don't care if it's five minutes or an hour, I don't care if it's once a week, or every single day, whatever you need. The challenge is that you might devote some time to memorizing some scripture, to committing it to your mind and to your heart so that when maybe a preacher stands up here and starts speaking aloud a scripture to you, you might in your mind, you don't say it out loud, but you might in your mind know where they're going.

When we stand in the baptismal font and we reflect the words of Jesus Christ, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore...,” you might be able to finish that in your own minds.

There is something that nurtures our spirit in the word of God. I think the psalmist is tapped into that, which is why they are so diligent about committing to the way of the word. I wonder what would happen if we did the same.

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