

**New St. James Presbyterian Church
Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost
Sunday, September 19, 2021**

**“Like Trees Planted by Streams of Water”
Psalm 1**

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“Happy are those”: our psalm this morning explores what it means to be happy, to be blessed—what it means to receive the deep, abiding blessing of God. And so we can’t help but lean forward and listen, desiring to learn what the psalmist lays out before us as God’s blessing...

“Happy are those *who do not*,” the psalmist begins,
“who do not follow the advice of the wicked,
or take the path that sinners tread,
or sit in the seat of scoffers” (v. 1).

There is blessing, according to the psalmist, in rebelling against broken patterns of conduct, in refusing to conform to cycles of hurt and harm and exploitation. Notice the language: “follow[ing] the advice of the wicked,” “tak[ing] the path that sinners tread,” “sit[ting] in the seat of scoffers”—this is the language of going with the flow when the flow is harmful, of accommodating to the status quo when that status quo is hurtful. So right off the bat, the first verse of the first psalm announces the blessing of resisting the norm when that norm is broken. When injustice and greed and oppression dominate, the psalmist tells us, the happy (the blessed) are those who say ‘no,’ who protest, who refuse to take part in that which harms humanity and damages creation.

And, instead of following in the ways of brokenness, the happy, the blessed seek different company, a different source of guidance, a different starting place, a different direction. The psalmist says:

“but their delight is in the law of the LORD,
and on his law they meditate day and night” (v. 2).

For the psalmist, the alternative to following patterns of brokenness is to delight in God’s law, to find joy in God’s instruction, to meditate on God’s guidance, to let God’s guiding Word permeate our thoughts and imagination and expectations: the blessed say ‘no’ to the patterns of brokenness and say ‘yes’ to the patterns of God’s law. And ‘law’ here, or ‘Torah’ in the Hebrew, describes God’s guidance, God’s instruction. We can understand “law of the LORD” here “in a comprehensive sense” as the instruction that offers God’s “will and way” (Mays). To “delight” in the law, then, is to delight in God’s guidance for us, God’s calling upon us, the instruction and challenge that God’s speaks into our lives.

For the blessed, this is their centre, the heart of their life and identity and imagination: the happy, the blessed, the psalmist announces, turn away from hurtful brokenness and instead embrace the healing and wholeness of God’s instruction, “meditat[ing]” on God’s law “day and night.” The blessed are those who immerse themselves in God’s counsel, God’s direction, God’s Word—who immerse themselves so deeply that it shapes their very selves (cf. Horton).

And those who find joy and delight seeking after God's guidance, the psalmist says, "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" (v. 3).

Isn't that a beautiful image? It's a picture of how delight in God's Word is life-giving (cf. Horton). The blessed thirst after the law, drink deeply of the law, listen devotedly to the Word of God's instruction—and God's instruction sustains them and enables them to grow and flourish. So the blessed, the happy, who attend to God's Word are "like trees planted by streams of water": as I tried to explore in the Word to the Children, the blessed are replenished continually and invisibly by the One who offers blessing, flourishing precisely because they are nourished beneath the surface. This is an image of continual thriving, constant flourishing, always renewed by God's blessing. And notice: as the blessed are nourished, they're able to nourish others! They are "like trees," the psalmist says, "which yield their fruit in its season." Those blessed by God may become a blessing to others through the fruit of their lives, as God's blessing flows to them and through them.

The psalmist then compares the blessed to those who lack blessing, those who—in the structure of this psalm—are guided not by God's instruction but by a prevailing brokenness: "The wicked are not so," the psalmist offers, "but are like chaff that the wind drives away" (v. 4).

Chaff blown by wind is an image from agricultural life in the ancient world. Before threshing machines, farmers in the ancient world could use wind to separate the nourishing grain from husks and stalks: throwing the harvest up into the air, the grain fell back down while the wind carried away the bits to be discarded (called chaff). Chaff blown by wind, then, is an image of instability, impermanence—something that's passing away. It's also an image of drying up, dying, separated from the nourishment of the soil... What a contrast to the green tree growing alongside springs of water: while the tree is rooted beside the life-giving stream with permanence and strength, the chaff is carried away to dry up in the wind.

This psalm is memorable, it's beautiful...but if we're honest, I think we should also find it in some ways troubling, maybe even unsettling. First: I wonder if this psalm might sound like it offers a false promise? I think it's important to acknowledge and reflect on this: it could seem at first like this psalm promises that those who reflect on God's guidance won't suffer harm—but that claim would, of course, be false. And the thing is, the psalmist knows this, too: the psalmist is far from naïve, and one of the themes in the Psalter is that the innocent are afflicted, the powerless suffer, the poor and marginal are oppressed.

So I think it's important to notice what's said—and also what's not said—in that image of the blessed tree. The psalmist does *not* say that the tree will never suffer adversity, that drought or disease will never come to that tree; rather, the psalmist tells us that—regardless what comes against it—this tree will continue to have an invisible source of life, sustaining it despite adversity, despite bad times, despite the drought. I'm reminded of a similar image in Jeremiah: "Blessed are those who trust in the LORD [...]"

They shall be like a tree planted by water,
sending out its roots by the stream.
It shall not fear when heat comes,

and its leaves shall stay green;
in the year of drought it is not anxious,
and it does not cease to bear fruit" (17:7-8).

The heat, the drought *will come*. Faithfulness to God does not help avoid adversity; in fact, faithfulness to the God of love and justice brings adversity, introduces adversity... Yet in the midst of what may come against the blessed, the drought and heat that afflicts the tree, a promise in Scripture is that the blessed can expect God's presence, God's instruction, God's sustaining blessing flowing beside the roots...

And second: another struggle we may experience, in hearing this psalm this morning, is that for a lot of us—maybe all of us—we maybe tend to feel more like that unstable chaff than that unshakeable tree. We all have our different struggles—some we admit, many we hide... We struggle with all kinds of things that threaten to overpower us: bitterness, fears, addictions, meanness, broken relationships, our lack of faith... Our lives aren't what we'd like them to be, and—if we had to describe ourselves honestly—I wonder if we'd identify more with the chaff blowing around than that mighty, unshakeable tree.

It's important to admit that, and to be honest here, because I think this brings us closer to the purpose of this psalm. This psalm doesn't just describe the strength of the blessed and the weakness of the wicked, and leave it at that: this psalm isn't passive but active. This psalm is a promise, but it's also an exhortation, an encouragement, a summons, a call (cf. Johnson).

This psalm beckons us and invites us, saying: "If you feel like that chaff, blown around by struggles, unstable, impermanent—then seek the blessing of God's instruction!" This psalm says to us: "If you want to become like that blessed tree planted by the water, then come to the water, the Living Water! Come, put down your roots in God's guiding Word; find your delight in obeying God's law; find your joy in God's loving purposes; come to the water, and become that strong tree." In the words we'll sing a little later on, "Behold, I freely give the living water, thirsty one: stoop down, and drink, and live!" (Bonar).

If you feel like you live on the wrong side of this psalm, like you belong with the dried-out chaff—then today this psalm comes to you as an invitation to seek the source of life, to become planted near God's blessing and instruction (cf. Jimenez): this psalm comes as a promise that there is a better way, a fuller way, a way that leads to blessing, a way that leads to life. And the psalmist invites us:

"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."

May we receive and respond to this invitation, becoming rooted in God's instruction to flourish
"like trees planted by streams of water." Amen.