

Psalm 1

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;
² but their delight is in the law of the Lord,
and on his law they meditate day and night.
³ 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.

⁴ The wicked are not so,
but are like chaff that the wind drives away.
⁵ Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,
nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous;
⁶ for the Lord watches over the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked will perish.

Season of Creation 4: Returning to Eden

I began this sermon with a singing of the first psalm in Hebrew, because as beautiful as some Bible passages are, and as well as Barbara read the passage this morning, we lose something in translation. The psalms were poems, poems that are translated into songs intended to delight the ear of the listener, and I think we should do our best to appreciate their lyrical beauty as well as the wisdom that they convey to us. And as you listen to this psalm you must confess that it's not just a happy song; there's something poignant about it. Because the psalms don't just convey human joy and human wisdom; they convey the full spectrum of human experience.

And our experience goes beyond words. Poetry is the best use of language, but like all language it is limited in its ability to convey a greater beauty. The psalms are poems and songs that are written for God and about God, but God is beyond words. God's beauty cannot be captured by mere words or even by music. And so as beautiful as psalms are, we should look beyond the psalms to the One who inspired them. Today, in this fourth Sunday of the Season of Creation I want to encourage you to see the beauty of creation as it was intended to be. I want us to go back to Eden, which is in part what this psalm is describing, and to recognize a beauty that is even beyond Eden, beyond the creation. I want us to recognize the beauty of the Creator.

The imagery used in this psalm is meant to draw our mind back to Eden, and back to God. We have that image of a tree planted by streams of living water, a tree that produces fruit and whose leaves never wither. We have an image of life, abundant, eternal life. We have an image of paradise, but it is a paradise lost, and we know it. The beauty and the harmony that existed in the Garden of Eden was spoiled by evil, and so we have this image of the chaff which doesn't

merely fall away from the good grain, but it is *driven* away as the man and woman – Adam and Eve – were driven out of the Garden once they transgressed.

The Jewish faith divides their Bible into three distinct sections; Law, History, and Wisdom. And each section reflects and complements the other two; The Law – beginning with Genesis – begins by describing the magnificence of creation, the first man and woman, then the first transgression that causes the man and woman to be expelled from the Garden of Eden, which leads God to present laws to Moses, laws that the Israelites must cherish and obey if they are to remain God’s people. The history section begins with Joshua who is preparing to occupy a land of milk and honey, a Garden of Eden of sorts, and God tells Joshua in the very first chapter that if he stands any chance of keeping the Israelites together he needs to meditate on the Law day and night – the rest of the history section recounts the ups and downs of the nation, the destruction of the Temple by the Babylonians, and the reconstruction of the Temple under Ezra and Nehemiah. The Wisdom literature is more poetic, and begins with the Psalms, songs of joy, hope, and praise but also songs of lament and despair, songs that reflect the ups and downs of Israel and the ups and downs of our lives. And Psalm 1 alludes to the paradise of Eden and asserts that our only hope of living in that happiness which was the Garden is to meditate on the Law day and night.

So we live in this time called history where all of us face struggles, and it behooves us to truly meditate on God’s Law as a way for us to navigate the evil of the world. It doesn’t inoculate us from bad things happening, but it prepares us for the evil that inevitably finds us. It teaches us to resist and to live as an example to others. And God, in his great consideration for his people (and we are among them) did not give us merely a dull legal volume to memorize; he gave us scripture that includes a lot of dull, dry law to meditate upon, but that scripture also includes narrative, both fiction and nonfiction as well as poetry and songs of hope and celebration. And because all three sections of the Hebrew Bible point to each other we need not restrict our meditation to the “thou shalt” and “thou shalt not.” We can enjoy the stories and the songs as well, because they remind us of the beauty of God’s law.

Of course we are blessed to have Jesus as our guide, who said, “I have not come to abolish the Law but to fulfill the Law” (Matthew 5:17). We remember that men used the Law to attack Jesus, so we need to be humble and acknowledge our own propensity to twist God’s Law in ways that do harm rather than good. But we can be thankful that Jesus teaches us what the Law really boils down to; love God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself (Matthew 22:36-40). But don’t let Jesus’ summary of the law distract you from looking at the Old Testament with its laws and history and poetry; let Jesus be the lens through which you see the scriptures of the Old Testament – the laws, the history, and the wisdom.

Because they direct our vision to the past beauty of Eden, unspoiled by evil, and a future where that glory is regained in the kingdom of God. We can see exactly *why* it is so important to meditate on that Law day and night because none of us want to dwell in the muck and the mire for our eternity. We want to dwell in Eden once again.

And just as poetry and language cannot fully convey the beauty of the creation that such poetry celebrates, creation itself cannot fully convey the beauty of the Creator. The beauty of the created order thrills and inspires us to meditate on God's law and be good stewards of what God has entrusted us with, but the God who placed such beauty in our midst and entrusted us with preserving it must indeed be more beautiful still.

So let us rejoice in the beauty of the Psalms which conveys to us the beauty of creation which in turn conveys to us the beauty of the creator. Let us honor that creator by heeding his call for us to meditate on the law, doing what is good in his eyes.