**The Psalms: Orientation, Disorientation, and New Orientation**

**June 11, 2017**

**Psalm 1 – “Blessed in the one”**

**1. Introduction: A Journey through the Psalms**

I really struggled in my first year of doctoral studies at the Toronto School of Theology. I had looked forward to this time of advance study, but when I got there it did not match my hopes and dreams. I struggled to find my place amid the newness of the world of academia. I doubted my own ability to think, to research and to write, so it was a challenge to get papers done. At times I wondered, silently, if I had made the right decision. One of the bright spots in that challenging year was a course on the Psalms. Since I was a student in biblical department, I needed competence in both Greek and Hebrew. So, to jump through the hoops of the program, I needed to take a semester of Hebrew, which I did not mind at all. Amid all the problems, demands, and doubts of the grad school, translating the Psalms from Hebrew to English was an oasis in the desert. On a weekly basis, I could immerse myself in the Hebrew text. It was a familiar and blessed place to be. When I was doing sermon preparation this week I dug out my Hebrew Bible and my old notes from the Psalms class and recaptured the joy that I felt. I even found my translation of Psalm 1, which came in handy as I read through the Psalm several times.

My experience with the Psalms is common to many people of faith. Time and time again Christians and Jews are drawn to the Psalms as they deal with the matters of the mind, body, and soul. Old Testament scholar, Walter Brueggemann begins his book on the Psalms with these words: “The book of Psalms provides the most reliable theological, pastoral, and liturgical resource given us in the biblical tradition. In season and out of season, generation after generation, faithful women and men turn to the Psalms as a most helpful resource for conversation with God about things that matter most” (*The Message of the Psalms,* p. 15). So, it may be a good exercise for us, as a congregation, to walk through the Psalms. Now there are 150 Psalms in the Old Testament and you’ll be relieved to hear that I don’t intend to preach *all* of them. While that would be an exercise in endurance, I’m taking a more manageable approach of a quick tour of nine weeks through the Psalms. While there are many possibilities for structuring this sermon series on the Psalms, I’m taking my cues from Walter Brueggemann, an Old Testament scholar who has written extensively on the Psalms.

Brueggemann analyzes the Psalms according to three larger themes or movements – *orientation, disorientation,* and *new orientation.* I’ve adopted this asthe overarching title of our journey through the Psalms. Over the next nine Sundays, I will explore particular Psalms that fit within each of these themes. The power of the Psalms lies in their ability to give expression to the deepest emotions that people can have when faced with all of the stuff of life. There are seasons in our lives when we experience a real sense of *happiness.* Our faith has found a resting place in a God who is loving, reliable, and trustworthy. There are no surprises or fears because God has it all under control. The Psalms that give voice to this state of well-being are called *Psalms of Orientation* since our lives are oriented, settled and well-ordered*.* Yet, as you and I know, it doesn’t take much to dislodge us from this peaceful place. Personal circumstances, such as declining health, bereavement, job loss, strained relationships, addictions, mental illness, and difficult transitions can challenge the stability of our lives and even our faith in God. In seasons like these we may be faced with unfamiliar and uncomfortable emotions such as rage, resentment, grief, guilt, shame, isolation, despair and hostility. The Psalms of this season are aptly called *Psalms of Disorientation.* Yet, God doesn’t leave us there. Just when we think that all is lost, God surprises us with an inexplicable intervention. He pulls us out of the pit of despair and places us on a solid rock. We respond with an exuberant “Wow” at new thing God has done. The Psalms that articulate this movement are called *Psalms of New Orientation.* These three themes, orientation, disorientation and new orientation, offer us a way to reflect on the Psalms as well as a lens to examine the life cycle of our spiritual lives. I invite you, then, on this journey through the Psalms.

**2. Psalm 1: Orientation to God’s Word**

The first stop on our journey is Psalm 1, a Psalm of *orientation* that sets the tone for the entire collection of the Psalms. Some classify Psalm 1 as a *Torah* Psalm since it encourages a life that is fixed upon the *Torah of the Lord* (1:2). Still others describe Psalm 1 as a *Wisdom* Psalm because it resembles the contrast in Proverbs 2:12-15, 20-22 between the way of the wicked and the way of the righteous. All these descriptions are compatible because the crucial message of the Psalm focuses upon taking the right path, which entails living a life in according with God’s word. Psalms of orientation, like this one, express the calm assurance that our world is orderly because it is in the hands of God who is loving, reliable, and faithful. The world is well-organized and trustworthy because God has created it and continues to sustain it. The faithful, then, are to respond to God and his well-ordered world by following his purposes as expressed in his word. Consequently, a life fixed upon God’s instruction will be placed on a solid foundation.

*(i) The Solid Foundation of the Righteous*

The opening verse of this Psalm is handled differently in the various translations. For many of us the opening statement, “Blessed is the man . . .” is more familiar than the one from our pew Bibles, “Oh, the joys of those . . .” A good translation of these opening words is “Happy is the man” (JPS) or “Happy are those” (NRSV). All these variations articulate the notion that the person whose life is centered upon God’s word will be happy and joyful. This doesn’t mean that Christians *always* have a smile pasted on their faces, skip down the street or whistle a happy tune. It does point to a confident trust in God and a sense of contentment that emerges from this. However, this happy estate is not given automatically to the righteous, rather, it is a direct result of their activity. The Psalm expresses this idea in both negative and positive terms.

The happy person *avoids* the negative influence of those who are defiantly opposed to God. In three poetically synonymous lines the Psalm declares that a person can be happy by steering clear of the advice, lifestyle, and the assembly of wicked persons (1:1). *Happy* is the person who:

• does not walk according to the advice of the wicked

• does stand on the path of sinners

• does not sit in the assembly of scoffers

These three statements draw attention to importance of *thinking*, *behaving* and *belonging* in shaping a person’s life. A happy person does not accept the way the wicked think. A happy person does not continually engage in sinful behaviour without sorrow, repentance and renewal. A happy person does not join with scoffers, who treat the holy God with “frivolous jest” (Keil & Delitzsch, *Psalms,* p. 86). In the words of Peter Craigie, “The righteous person avoids all the dimensions of the way of the wicked, therein lie the source of blessedness and happiness” (*Psalms,* p. 27).

At the same time, the happy person must take positive action and fix his or her life upon God’s word. Verse two can be translated, “But his delight is in the *torah* of the Lord and on his *torah* he meditates day and night.” The Hebrew word, *torah,* can be understood as the first five books of the Old Testament (the Torah or the Law) or it can also refer to the entire Old Testament. The word itself means *instruction* so it can represent all of God’s teachings. Our pew Bible offers a nice translation, “But they delight in doing everything the Lord wants.” In whatever way we translate *torah*, the main point is that God’s instruction, what he wants for our lives, stands opposed to the way the world thinks and operates. Our thinking can either be shaped by God’s word or the advice of the wicked and that will ultimately impact how we live our lives.

The happy person delights in the instruction of the Lord. So much so that he *meditates* on God’s word day and night. As a result, the happy person’s thoughts are moulded by God’s instruction as it sinks deep in to his or her mind and heart. Yet, in order to ponder God’s word, we need to be reading it and thinking about it. One scholar has defined the Hebrew word for *meditate* as “a quiet soliloquy of the one who is searching and thinking” (Keil & Delitzsch, *Psalms,* p. 85). Eugene Peterson’s translation encourages us to “*chew* on Scripture day and night” (*The Message,* p. 552). But our pondering of Scripture is not merely a mystical or devotional act performed in a place of prayer; it is intended to move us to take action in the world. Just as God’s word shapes our thinking, so it affects our actions. But it begins with reading God’s word.

The centerpiece of the Psalm is a beautiful image of a fruitful, green tree planted beside streams of water (1:3). The happy person is like this tree. A tree or any plant will flourish or fade depending on the amount of water it receives. The tree in this Psalm is planted beside streams of water, so it will naturally flourish. In the same way, the person who delights in God’s word naturally flourishes because they are living within the guidelines set out by the Creator of all life. The tree in this Psalm produces its fruit in season, so the constant irrigation provided by the streams of water has a clear result. Similarly, the happy person doesn’t simply soak up God’s word, but its results can be observed in production of real fruit. God’s word produces fruit in our lives, shaping our character, guiding our behaviour, and moving us into service. Drought does not affect the tree in this Psalm because its leaf does not wither and whatever it produces prospers. Likewise, the happy or righteous person flourishes and prospers because he or she lives according to the will of God. This rich image is nicely summed up by this quote: “The green foliage is an emblem of faith, which converts the water of life of the divine word into sap and strength and the fruit, an emblem of works, which gradually ripen and scatter their blessings around” (Keil & Delitzsch, *Psalms,* p. 86).

(ii) *The Impermanence of the Wicked*

The image of the righteous or the happy person as a fruitful, green, and enduring tree is in stark contrast with the description of the wicked. With an abrupt transition and a succinct simile the Psalm states, “Not so the wicked; rather, they are like the chaff that the wind blows away” (1:4). This image reflects the harvesting practices of the time. During the grain harvest the whole plant would be cut down and arranged into bunches or sheaves. These would be taken to the threshing floor where the crops would be crushed with a stick to separate the grain from the stalks. After the threshing, the grain would be separated from the outer husk through a process called winnowing; the grain would be tossed into the air and the husks or the chaff would be blown away, leaving only the grain. The wicked, then, are compared to this useless part of the crop that is blown away by the wind and disposed of by the farmer. The valuable part, the grain, is left behind and gathered up. Since the wicked live in defiance of God’s ways, their lives are marked by impermanence. They are like chaff in the wind – rootless, weightless and useless.

In two lines of synonymous parallelism the Psalm summarizes the plight of the wicked (1:5): “Therefore,

• the wicked will not stand in the judgment

• nor the sinners in the congregation of the righteous.

Sadly, those who live in defiance of God will not have a leg to stand on when they stand before the Judge (Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72,* p. 49). Ultimately, there will be no place for them in the company of the righteous.

(iii) *The Parting of the Ways*

The Psalm concludes with a stark contrast between the two different people featured in it: the righteous/happy and the wicked. “The Lord *knows* the way of the righteous but the way of the wicked is doomed” (1:6). The Lord *knows* the path of the righteous. This means more than being informed about it. It means that God *cares*, *protects, watches over, cherishes,* and *maps out* the path of the righteous. In contrast, the way of the wicked is doomed; it will end in ruin. Eugene Peterson’s translation vividly expresses this: “God charts the road you take. The road *they* take is Skid Row” (*The Message,* p. 552).

**3. Our Response: Hearing and Following**

Jesus’ words at the end of the Sermon on the Mount summarize the challenge of this Psalm. “Anyone who listens to my teaching and follows it is wise, like a person who builds a house on solid rock.Though the rain comes in torrents and the floodwaters rise and the winds beat against that house, it won’t collapse because it is built on bedrock.But anyone who hears my teaching and doesn’t obey it is foolish, like a person who builds a house on sand.When the rains and floods come and the winds beat against that house, it will collapse with a mighty crash” (Matthew 7:24-27).

Let the word of God dwell richly in your hearts. Let the instruction of the Lord shape your thinking, character, and conduct. Let the word of God produce much fruit in your lives. Yet, the challenge is to read and meditate on his word.