

March 6, 2022
Rev. Kerry Smith

Psalms: Honest to God
Greenland Hills United Methodist Church

Psalms 1

New Revised Standard Version

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.

For the next forty days I want to invite you to a season of spiritual preparation as we journey towards Easter. Forty days of self-examination and repentance, by prayer, fasting, self-denial, and reading and meditating on God's Holy Word. Forty days to grow closer to God, closer to one another, and closer to our neighbor. This Lenten season we will be looking at the Psalms and being honest with God in our joy, in our anger, and in our sadness. The Psalms are the prayers of people just like us, people who struggled, who didn't understand, who cried, who looked at a sunset and felt in complete awe. We will see how people thousands of years ago sang a song to God. You might want to pray the Psalms over these forty days - aloud, or in your heart, or even through coloring.

Psalms is the prayer book of the Bible; it is the hymnal of ancient Israel, and it opens with a poem about morality and how we live and make decisions. Psalm 1 is a wisdom psalm talking about walking in God's ways with a goal of a changed life. I love Psalm 1's imagery of trees planted by streams of water, yielding fruit with leaves that do not wither. I think of all of the trees here around Greenland Hills, and apparently a creek used to run right through this land where the sanctuary sits right now. Happy are those, blessed are those, who follow God, who listen to God, who pray to God. If we do that, then everything that we do prospers.

When people ask me why Methodists have women preachers, I tell them about John Wesley, the first Methodist. He would preach where the people were, often in open fields. Women started to preach and he was talking with his mom Susanna about these women preachers. Should he stop them? What should he do? His mom asked him if they had fruit. Did their preaching bring people closer to God? Did people come to faith in Christ because of their words? John said yes, and so there are women preachers in the Methodist Church.

I am honored to be the pastor in this place with you amazing people. We are a reconciling congregation which means we believe in the full inclusion of LGBTQI persons within The United Methodist Church in marriage and in ordination. All are welcome and all are celebrated. We are a church that shares God's love in concrete ways through outreach activities across our city and the world. This is a place that is constantly asking what good is needed in the world and then finding the way to do it. We value creativity, community, mission, music, and we welcome spiritual questions. In our lives we deal with disappointments, joy, uncertainty, the whole bit, and our mind changes all the time as we learn how Jesus would've dealt with those things. We realize that the questions are more important than the answers.

The way of life that is described in Psalm 1 is centered in God, not ourselves. One of my memories of dating my husband Lee is being at a park in downtown San Antonio. We were in college and I asked him what he wanted out of life. I knew what I wanted. I wanted fame and success and to be important. Lee said that he wanted to be happy. His answer was way better than mine. Happiness is found in the teachings of God. Not in how much stuff you have. The goal of life is praising God. Prosperity comes from being connected to the source of life – God.

To be plugged into God, connected to the source of life, we have to focus on God and the richness of generosity and prayer, the pleasure of service and worship, and the leisure of Sabbath rest and silence in the presence of God.

If we do this, then our life will be as fruitful, prosperous, and resilient as a tree planted by streams of water with roots growing deep into a steady source of hydration. This tree is not afraid when heat comes because its leaves remain alive. This tree is not anxious when a drought arrives because it remains fruitful. A tree gives us this beautiful image of growing deep roots in God's grace and stretching the limbs of our lives wide and far in love for our neighbor.

I love the first part of the psalm, but then it starts talking about the wicked. Throughout the Psalms, the writers tell the story of the world where the righteous are attacked and the wicked prosper. We see it in our world today. Too often the bad people win and the good people don't. When the writer of Psalm 1 talks about wickedness, I think they are talking about autonomy, thinking that someone can do life alone. We think that self-sufficiency is a mark of success, that idea that if you want help or need help either from others or from God, it is a sign of weakness. But we are not meant to live as isolated selves. Wickedness is when we think that we are doing all right by ourselves, that we don't need help. We are called to make connection with God as the source of life, to trust God, and to trust others. One of the richest times in this church's history was in the 1980s when the churches in East Dallas weren't making it individually on their own, so a partnership was created called the East Dallas Cooperative Parish. Churches working together were so much stronger than churches struggling alone.

How can we live lives where we open ourselves up to God's teaching and God's direction? Where we are open to see how God continues to act and be revealed in the lives of people and the life of the world? There are so many people whose lives are transformed because of this place. Because of your generosity, because of your commitment to this place being open to all so many lives are touched. A few years ago, I helped the Boy Scout troop that meets here on Tuesday evenings spread mulch on the playground. I talked with one of the boys who was really curious about church. Do you mean anyone can come here? Yes! Do you have to dress in a certain way? No. What do people do? We sing songs, we listen to stories about God's love in the Bible, we pray for one another. Why do you do that? Because we are family and you are welcome, anyone is welcome.

I remember one time my husband Lee was out of town for work and I was running an errand. When I tried to start the car, the battery was dead. Really dead. I didn't know who to call or what to do, and was sort of staring around in disbelief. What was I going to do? Then, the driver of the car in front of me said, your battery is dead. I said, I think you are right, I don't know what to do. He asked if I had jumper cables and I said I didn't, though I know what I need for Christmas! He didn't have any jumper cables, but the person next to us let us borrow theirs, and the car in front of me turned around and jumped my car. Regretfully, I didn't ask anyone their name, but I was overwhelmed by the way that people I didn't know came together to help me, someone they didn't know. Don't we all long to know that there's a graciousness at the heart of creation? That people are good.

I see stories coming out of Ukraine of Chef Jose Andres feeding hungry refugees at the Ukraine border with his World Central Kitchen and I can't help but donate money. I watch a video of Ukrainian moms giving a surrendering Russian soldier food, tea, and helping him call his mom so he could tell her that he is okay. We have a human hunger for goodness. Here in this place we can experience that goodness. I'm hopeful today because of who you are. All of you show me what radical kindness actually looks like. In this place, you are seen, you are heard, and

together we go change the world. We are planted by a stream of living water, so may we spread the fruit of God's love with everyone that we see. Amen.