

**Proper 20 Year B**

**9/19/2021**

**Proverbs 31:10-31; Psalm 1; James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a; Mark 9:30-37**

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My mother was born and raised in a small northern California town called Eureka... in Humboldt County.

It is there and also as you go south that you find some true giants of our world.

Redwood trees.

And they are amazing.

One of my fondest memories growing up was taking a family vacation to that area...

Seeing these amazing trees...

Driving a car through one as the trunk was hollowed out.

It's hard to understand just how big they are until you are standing next to one.

Trees are amazing...

They produce the air that we breathe...

They provide wood, shade, paper, and so many other things.

And many of our collective childhood memories are comprised of climbing up a tree and/or taking a walk in the forest.

Trees are celebrated...

In paintings...

Even at theme parks... just drive down the road to Animal Kingdom...

You will see a big fake one.

And in books...

The love and care for trees is a major theme in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*.

One of the places that Tera and I have enjoyed since we moved to Central Florida is Leu Gardens in Orlando...

The trees there are magnificent.

Well, trees show up a lot in scripture as well.

In the beginning...

In Genesis...

You have the story of Adam and Eve...

And a tree...

the tree of the knowledge of good and evil...

In the book of Revelation, you have a tree...

In the last chapter of the Bible...

St. John wrote:

*On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. (Revelation 22:2).*

The Bible story starts with a tree and ends with a tree.

Of course, Jesus talked about trees too...

The fig tree, the mustard seed growing into a tree...

And we have a tree in our reading today...

In our Psalm...

The first Psalm of 150 in the Psalter.

Which is important...

The Psalms are not in random order...

They are purposely organized.

So, this Psalm serves as an opening guide to what follows...

Certain themes and agendas are introduced...

And this is important...

Remember this was the hymnal Jesus used.

The primary song book of the early church.

And so, when we approach Psalm 1, we are invited to be like a beautifully nurtured tree.

We read:

[The righteous] *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.*

So, the question is... how do we become like these trees?

Its water source is right next to it...

It yields fruit in the right time...

When drought comes the leaves stay green...

Its roots are deep in the fertile wet soil...

This tree prospers.

And in comparison, the wicked are like chaff...

The stuff the wind blows away after the corn or seed has been threshed...

Its worthless and thrown away...

Although life is usually more complex than a simplistic understanding of the Righteous and the Wicked...

The Bible often uses these polarities to display the way the people of God are to behave and respond in this world.

You may recall St. Paul uses this polarity in Galatians 5 as he compares the works of the flesh to the fruit of the Spirit.

Jesus does a similar comparison in Matthew 25 with the actions of the sheep and the goats.

Likewise, in our text from Psalm 1, we see a comparison of the wicked and the righteous.

And we see God's prescribed ordering of life.

The psalm starts with *Happy or Blessed are they who have not walked in the counsel of the wicked, nor lingered in the way of sinners, nor sat in the seats of the scornful.*

What this doesn't mean is that we refuse to have any relationship with the wicked in our society or culture.

It does not mean we withdraw into our own little community...

Nor does it mean that we remain in some defensive position waiting to pounce or defend ourselves from all cultural attacks.

We can see this among some parts of our Christian world that does not engage with the world...

Or perhaps believes that the job of the Christian is to argue for every perceived Christian truth around every cultural corner.

Jesus certainly ate with sinners... he was known as a friend of sinners.

But what Jesus did not do is follow the way of sinners.

What the Psalmist does call us to do is to avoid the influence and effect the wicked have on life.

To not think in the same terms...

To have a different mindset than the world that so influences the perceptions, decisions, and beliefs of so many.

Our world view comes from a different place...

A different perspective.

And that place is found in the instruction of God.

This is made clear in the second verse:

*Their delight is in the law of the Lord, and they meditate on his law day and night.*

The word *law* here is a translation of the word *Torah*.

A Hebrew word...

Often used to describe the first five books of the Bible.

The books of Moses.

The best meaning of *Torah* is probably our word instruction.

It is the instruction of God...

And the delight of the righteous is in the instruction of the Lord.

The Holy Scriptures...

And it is not just a delight in the piety of studying the word of God...

Not just in checking off your list – read bible...

As some kind of self-justification...

Make me feel good chore...

But it is the delighting in the instruction because through it...

*the Lord reaches, touches, and shapes the human soul.*<sup>1</sup>

As Dr. James Mays puts it.

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<sup>1</sup> James L. Mays, *Psalms*, Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1994), 42.

Our delight is in the instruction of God because that is the source of which we interact with God...

He forms us...

Shapes us...

Reaches into our hearts and minds and shows us a better way.

That is the delight!

And it is delightful because it is a means of grace.

And the righteous meditate on God's law...

God's instructions...

The Holy Scripture...

Day and night...

In other words, all the time.

Meditation has become a popular practice for many...

And here meditation is certainly encouraged.

However, in contrast to some forms of meditation which encourage emptying the mind...

The emphasis here is on the object of the meditation.

The Hebrew literally means “to mutter”...

As to *mull* it over and over...

Or to *ponder*.<sup>2</sup>

The idea is to have the instructions of God constantly with us...

In our thoughts...

It is the prayer that we say in our liturgy right before we hear the deacon read the Gospel...

May the words we hear be in our mind, on our lips, and in our heart.

It is to be so saturated with God’s word that we are shaped and formed by his instructions.

So that all we take in in this world is processed through the lens of Holy Scripture.

That our interpretation of the events in this world and the events in our lives comes from the instruction of God...

And not the pundits of this world.

Psalm 1 calls us to a different life than the one espoused in this world.

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<sup>2</sup> Craig C. Broyles, *Pslams*, NIBC (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1999), 42.

It is a call to be so enamored with God's instructions...

A desire for God's grace through his Holy Scriptures to shape us and form us into the image of God...

To not live the way of the wicked who as verse five tells us will be found wanting in the day of justice.

But may we take great hope...

That the task of following all the instructions of God does not lie solely within our own power.

We have the last verse of Psalm 1.

*For the Lord knows the way of the righteous...*

Or as another version has it:

*The Lord watches over the way of the righteous.*<sup>3</sup>

God is seeing us through...

You see we are made righteous when we confess our faith in Jesus.

We are justified when we admit our sins and confess Jesus as our Lord and Savior.

We are made new when the Spirit of God makes his home in us.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 43.

We are transformed by the sacramental grace of God when we are baptized in the waters of His mercy.

And God watches over us...

When we read his instructions...

Meditating on his Holy Word...

Shaping us...

Transforming us...

A delight on our part...

And a delight on God's part.

For it is here we find once more that we are not alone...

We are chosen by God...

His possession...

And it is God...

Who grows us into that great tree...

Planted by the stream of water...

Bearing fruit in due season...

And in the times of drought and struggle...

Our leaves remain green.

There is a lot in this world that wants to consume our thoughts...

To have the front seats in our mind...

Church, may we take delight in God's word...

His instructions...

May we be shaped, formed, and renewed...

As we hear his good will toward us.

That is our delight.

Amen.