

Our True Nourishment is Rooted in God

A Sermon preached by The Rev. Tom Pumphrey
At St. Peter & St. Paul, Marietta, GA, September 23, 2018
The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 20, Year B),
Proverbs 31:10-31; Psalm 1; James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a; Mark 9:30-37

Psalm 1 (from the Book of Common Prayer, p.585)

*Happy 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!
Their delight is in the law of the LORD, *
and they meditate on his law day and night.
They are like trees planted by streams of water, bearing fruit in due season, with leaves that do not wither; *
everything they do shall prosper.
It is not so with the wicked; *
they are like chaff which the wind blows away.
Therefore the wicked shall not stand upright when judgment comes, *
nor the sinner in the council of the righteous.
For the LORD knows the way of the righteous, *
but the way of the wicked is doomed.*

Our readings in recent weeks have touched on wisdom. We heard Solomon seek God’s wisdom and we’ve read from the proverbs last week and this week. James touches on wisdom—the wisdom that is from above. And today’s psalm also relates to wisdom: God’s wisdom, not the wisdom of this world. I would like to look at the psalm in particular today. We read psalms every Sunday, but rarely do preachers make the psalm the focus of their sermons. The psalmist writes in Hebrew poetry: in pairs of phrases, usually that compare or contrast ideas. In this case, the psalmist considers the blessings found by those who are rooted in God.

Other writers pick up on this imagery, including the Prophet Jeremiah, who also contrasts the way of the wicked and the way of the righteous. He describes those who trust in mere mortals “*like a shrub in the desert.*” But “*Blessed are those who trust in the LORD, whose trust is 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.*” (Jeremiah 17:5-8).

These writers use the imagery of a tree to talk about where we get our nourishment—how we are sustained amid the challenges of life. These metaphors tell us that our nourishment is rooted in God.

Think of the image of this desert shrub or tree. In dry sand, a tree’s roots find little water and no stability. Strong winds overcome the shallow roots and loose sand. In dry sand, shrubs become—*tumbleweeds*. A drought can kill a tree planted in the desert. But if you transplant that tree by a stream of water, the roots would eventually be able to find water in the ground, and strengthen and grow. Even in a drought, by a stream there is enough water to keep the tree alive. The tree with strong roots can survive the hardship of wind and drought, and continue to bear fruit.

The Psalmist says that our lives are just like these trees. When we rely on our own priorities, we are like trees in the desert. But our true nourishment is rooted in God.

The metaphor of a tree isn't unusual, of course. We often remark about the stability and steadiness of certain people, saying that they are "grounded" or "well rooted." Did you ever notice that no one ever says "he is so well grounded in his pursuit of wealth?" No one ever says "she is so well rooted in selfishness!" Being rooted or grounded means being connected to something more permanent, more reliable and more true. The people who are grounded in this way have surprising strength to be joyful and stay steady and strong even in times of hardship. These are people grounded in God.

We desire these qualities in ourselves, but finding our own grounding and rootedness proves difficult. We so often plant ourselves in the dry and sandy soil of material wealth, thinking that enough money will buy a strong and stable life. We plant ourselves in the shifting sands of the pursuit of our careers, thinking that our accomplishments will build value in our identity. We try to put down roots in the fantasy of the perfect family—the family without conflict or disagreement, but our real families will never reach perfection. We dream of perfect bodies or peak health or fitness, but our bodies don't always cooperate, our health is always changing, and we need more stable soil. These dreams are compelling to us—they capture our attention and imagination and energy. But when the winds of crisis and turmoil and illness blow, we topple like trees planted in dry sand. The disciples had dreams of a victorious Israel, but they needed more if they were going to follow Jesus all the way to Jerusalem and to the cross.

The Psalmist offers a very different vision of health—a very different vision of what it means to be "rooted" or "grounded." If we only speak of being "rooted" or "grounded," we forget to ask the question "rooted in what? Grounded in what?" For the Psalmist and for the prophets and for Jesus, the desert is for those whose trust is in themselves—in their riches or their own strength. If we want that "grounding," that "rootedness," then we need to plant ourselves in God, and stretch out our roots deep into God's stream of clear water for our souls. In God, we truly find the nourishment our souls and bodies need.

So what does it mean for us to be "grounded in God" or "rooted in God?" What does that look like? We begin by trusting God. The passage I quoted for you from Jeremiah repeats this for emphasis "Blessed are those who trust in the LORD, whose trust is the LORD." When we trust in our own strength, we will eventually find ourselves lacking. Surely, we can be strong sometimes, but just as surely, we are not always strong. Those times seem to be just the times when life gets tougher that we can handle. But when we trust in God and in God's strength and wisdom, our lives are centered on the priorities of the one who made us and who loves us. We find our nourishment rooted in God.

And so we trust in God and seek God in prayer. We pray at church, and we pray at home. We can pray in the morning or the evening. We can take a break in our busy day to focus ten minutes exclusively on God in prayer. We can pray formal prayers or conversational prayers, or simply the prayers of "thanks!" or "help!" or "sorry." We can pray alone and we can pray with others. We can rest in God's presence and listen for his guidance.

The Psalmist says that those like trees planted by streams of water are those whose "delight is in the law of the LORD." Of course, the word for "law" is Torah. The psalmist is talking about

meditating on Holy Scripture to learn and understand and absorb God's word and God's direction into our lives. Studying scripture, especially in the company of fellow Christians, helps us to be rooted in God's perspective, and reminded of God's values and priorities. In a world obsessed with self and fleeting pleasures and hostile to things that endure, prayer and study of scripture help us to sink roots into solid ground, and find nourishment for our souls.

Of course, we are called to go into the world. Like the disciples in today's Gospel reading, God will call us into the world, and we may face challenges. But as we serve Christ in the world, we practice the habits of living that ground us in the grace and mercy of God. We find ourselves more in touch with God's generosity and care. We take ourselves out of our own self-interest and build through our actions a faith whose roots go deeper and stronger into God.

“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.”

Through daily prayer and study and service, we grow our roots deep into the soil of God's grace. We give more and more of our unpredictable lives into God's care, and find more strength that will outlast any drought that might come along—spiritual, physical, or relational. When the dry winds of conflict and distress blow, we will not topple or wither. With roots deep in Jesus Christ, we will find the nourishment that our souls and bodies need. In trusting God, and in prayer, study and service, we find our nourishment rooted in God.