



**“Like Trees: A Meditation on Psalm 1”
Scripture – Psalm 1
Sermon preached by Sudie Niesen Thompson
Sunday, September 30, 2018**

The voice coming from the television has a rich and resonant timbre: “This is the Angel Oak, or simply ‘The Tree’ to locals,” it says. At the beginning of the Allstate Insurance ad — launched in the aftermath of Hurricane Florence — the camera focuses on the sturdy, upper limbs of a centuries-old tree in Johns Island, South Carolina.¹ “Some say it’s the oldest living thing east of the Mississippi” the spokesman continues.

As the camera slowly pans out, viewers take in the magnitude of this venerable oak: its lush greenery offering a dense shelter from both sun and rain; its trunk so massive that it would require the wing-span of four tall men to encircle it; its twisting, fern-covered branches — some stretching heavenward, others bending toward earth, as if inviting curious souls to climb on. It’s an impressive tree. A stalwart tree. An enduring tree.

“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 Angel Oak of South Carolina helps us picture the kind of tree the Psalmist imagines. Those who delight in the law of the Lord are like trees planted by flowing streams. Those who meditate day and night on God’s law are like trees with leaves that do not wither. The righteous, it seems, are a bit like that Angel Oak ... Sturdy. Steadfast. Able to withstand the most violent storm. Surviving. Thriving. “In all that they do, they prosper,” says the Psalmist.

In all that they do, they prosper.

Now, on a quick read, I would question the Psalmist’s claim.

I’m not sure if things have changed that much in the last twenty-five hundred years (give or take), but this assertion doesn’t exactly jive with my experience of the world. I’m guessing many of you share my skepticism.

¹ “Still Standing,” Allstate Insurance (September 2018).

Because we have all seen the opposite hold true ... in hospital rooms and court rooms, on playgrounds and city streets we have seen righteous people falter and fall, while dehumanizing and death-dealing forces prevail. In a world where hurricanes batter coastlines, and trauma robs families of their sense of safety, where cancer ravages bodies, and poverty decimates communities, we have all seen people of great faith and great faithfulness teeter and topple — more like precarious pine trees than strong, sturdy oaks.

Meanwhile, those who seem to disregard God's teachings prosper. All around us, we see self-serving ways "pay off." Corporate profits increase while pollution spoils our waterways. Greed runs rampant while the poor lose ground. Abuses of power seem to go unchecked, while shared values yield to privileged voices.

Far from being "like chaff that the wind drives away," the wicked — or at least — the ways of the wicked seem to be deeply rooted, and deeply resistant to being rooted out.

Oh, how easy it would be to live in a world where the ways of the righteous do prosper and the ways of the wicked perish! How easy it would be to live in a world where those who delight in God's law reap their reward, and those who flaunt it suffer the consequences of their choices.

But we don't live in that world.

And — to be honest — I don't think the Psalmist envisions that world either. I don't think the destinies of the "just" and "un-just" can be as deftly drawn as a cursory reading of the Psalm would suggest. So let's dive a little deeper into the text.

If we meditate on these holy words — just as Psalm 1 encourages us to do — we discover that this text is not so much intent on categorizing people as just or unjust, or on parceling out rewards and punishments, or on satisfying our acute sense of justice. Psalm 1 is an invitation, a call, a charge to those of us who seek God's ways.

"Happy are those ... [whose] delight is in the law of the Lord,
and on [God's] law they meditate day and night.

They are like trees planted by streams of water ..."

They are like trees planted by streams of water.

For me this image holds the key — this picture of a tree tenaciously rooted on a riverbank, where it has the nourishment it needs to grow sturdy and strong, like South Carolina's Angel Oak.

Those who thirst for the word of the Lord are like trees whose roots have found ever-flowing streams. For they are grounded in the thing that sustains life, the thing that nourishes so fully that their branches bear fruit in its season: The teachings of God.

I use the word 'teachings' deliberately because I think it more fully captures the poet's intent. 'Law' can sound so rigid, so transactional to our modern ears that it has the effect of reducing the Lord's commandments to a rule book. But in the tradition of our faith, the law — or *torah*, to use the Hebrew — reflects nothing less than God's desire for the world, and teaches us how to live in right relationship with Creator and creation. As Psalms scholar Clint McCann explains: "In the broadest sense, [*torah*] suggests God's will."²

² J. Clinton McCann, "Commentary on Psalm 1," www.workingpreacher.org.

Centuries after Psalm 1 was written down, Jesus summarized the *torah* with words that have become imprinted upon our hearts: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind ... [And] you shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt 22:37-39). In short, *torah* is the law of love.

The Psalmist calls us to meditate day and night upon the teachings of God — not by poring over Deuteronomy by candlelight (though, that’s part of it), but by discerning — in all things — what it means to love the Lord with heart, soul, and mind and to love our neighbors as ourselves. So, whether we are wandering the canned food aisle at the grocery store, or making that phone call we’ve put off so long, whether we are waiting in line at the DMV, or bandaging a toddler’s scraped up knee — we are to attend to God’s law of love.

When we do so — when we seek to discern in all things the will of God — we become like trees planted by streams of water ... Drawing nourishment from the well-spring of life, and sustenance from the fountain of grace. Always refreshing our faith. Always renewing our souls. Because our roots reach deeply into the living waters of God’s eternal truth.

Now, there’s something else about these trees: They are not ornamental. They are not mere objects of beauty lining the riverbank for the pleasure of passersby, so that onlookers may marvel at their sturdy trunks, their sprawling branches, their striking foliage. Nor do they thrive simply as testaments to the worth of the soil and the purity of the water where they are planted.

These trees, the Psalm tells us, “yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither.” They bear fruit ... figs or pomegranates or olives or almonds — the variety does not matter ... what matters is that their produce feeds the world. So the trees planted beside flowing streams — which are nourished and sustained by the teachings of God — in turn, nourish and sustain others. When these trees flourish, those around them flourish: the children who climb into their branches to pluck the ripe lemons, the birds that gather their seeds and pits, the communities that harvest the fruit for their livelihood.

It is an image of abundance — thriving trees planted by life-giving streams, bearing fruit that gives life to others. No wonder the Psalmist declares: “In all they do, they prosper.”

Yet this is a prosperity not limited to the economic success of some, but broadened into well-being for all. Prosperity is not a reward the faithful earn through obedience, but a gift that blesses others so that all creation flourishes.

So it is with those who ground their lives in God’s teachings, seeking always to love the Lord with heart, soul, and mind and to love their neighbors as themselves. For their acts of faithfulness — large and small — bear fruit in its season: the kindness offered to the harried mother in the airport security line; the dollar spent buying coffee for a stranger; the time given to acknowledge the humanity of that person begging along the street; the listening ear offered a neighbor distraught over the week’s events. Such expressions of love — rooted in and nourished by the ever-flowing stream of God’s grace — lead to the flourishing of others. It transforms the community around them. So that all may prosper.

Unsurprisingly, this way of life — one rooted in God’s law of love — leads to fullness, joy, well-being. This is the assurance of Psalm 1: That those who orient their lives to God and neighbor discover the joy of living with and for others. And all thrive.

I invite you to picture again that Angel Oak: a tree with stories to tell — five hundred years of stories, to be precise: I wonder how many birds have nested in its branches, how many squirrels have gathered acorns from around its roots. How many picnic goers have found shelter under its generous canopy? I can only imagine how many school children have gravitated to this jungle gym of an oak.

And that's just one tree. What difference might a grove of faithful trees make?

There was a story published this week in *Presbyterians Today* about the Sanctuary Church in Fort Lauderdale, Florida.³ It once was a grand church building located on eight acres of land along U.S. Highway 1, with a waterfront on the Middle River. Some fifty years ago it housed a congregation of almost sixteen hundred people ... When the present pastor arrived the active congregation numbered about twenty-five. The question of their future was a real one—and some would argue that closing that church and selling the property would have generated a small fortune for mission.

But the faithful remnant were deeply rooted, and wondered how they might yet bear fruit. Discerning a call to serve their neighbors, they were led to open their building to any number of non-profits and soon experienced how their hospitality could make a tangible difference in the lives of their community.

And as they opened their hearts and home to their neighbors, God seeded their imaginations with a call to something larger: Dreams emerged. Possibilities were explored. And soon-now — with the support of their presbytery — the congregation will break ground on a project that will transform their property into the Sanctuary Village. Grounded in faith on the shores of the river, this resilient congregation will build a place that welcomes the poor and provides multiple services: health care, affordable housing, schools, and office space. With hearts and imaginations reaching up to heaven and bending toward earth, the people of Sanctuary Church are shaping a radically new future so that others may find shelter and the yield they need to prosper. Who knows how many will thrive because of the leap of faith of one small congregation whose roots draw deeply from God's teachings?

And how many more, the world over, will thrive if all who are rooted in God's law of love open their hearts to the seeds God is planting in our midst. What joy we all might know. For:

“Happy are those ... [whose] delight is in the law of the Lord,
and on [God's] 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.”

And the world prospers with them.

May it be so.

Prayers of the People ~ Gregory Knox Jones

God of the ages, as we reflect on Psalm 1, we acknowledge that there are moments when the choice before us is stark: one path is absolutely right and one path is obviously wrong. One way chooses kindness and the other harbors malice. One track seeks truth and the other relies on deception. One road marches to freedom and one road blazes to bondage. Yet, even when the choice is clear, we do not always choose well. Is it because we are tempted to take the easy path over the more demanding one? We pray for the moral courage to travel the road that you have shown us is right and true and good.

³ Sherry Blackman, “Dwindling church revives with grand vision,” *Presbyterians Today* (September 24, 2018).

Yet, God, we confess that courage is not always enough, because the choices before us are not always clear. Sometimes the choices become shrouded in fog and it is difficult to know which is the high road and which is the low. Other times we are confounded because there are not simply two paths, but four or five from which to choose. At such times we pray for your guidance. Help us to discern the noble path from the self-promoting paths. Remind us that while short-cuts may appear attractive, they can lead to a stunted character. Nudge us toward the path that Jesus would take, even if it is the steepest climb.

Eternal God, we are a nation in turmoil. Divisiveness is the order of the day as rancor, ill-will and distrust shove civility aside. Honesty, decency, and respect are trampled in the drive to crush one's opponents. Remind us that differences of opinion need not devour the ties that bind us together.

Grant us the will to be filled with the love of Christ and fueled by the Spirit of Christ. May we replace venom with good will, crudeness with grace, and disdain with dignity. May we always strive to speak the truth, but may we speak it in love. May we always strive for justice, but not simply out of a desire to punish. And may we strive for the common good over the good of the few so that the values and virtues of your heavenly kingdom may become present on earth.

Now, hear us as we pray the prayer Jesus taught us to pray together, saying, **Our Father...**