

Lent 2014 – “Praying The Psalms”

Wisdom: Psalm 1



We live in the world of Hallmark – where there is a card for every occasion. We can even send electronic greeting cards now – knowing that someone else is better at putting our thoughts into words than we would ever be. I often think of the Book of Psalms as something like the “Hallmark Greeting Cards” section of the Bible. In the Psalms are the words that capture the fullness of our human experience.

Psalms express our deep and strong emotions, no matter the situation. The Psalms though written down so long ago are seemingly timeless. We know those feelings. They are our own.

Part of the reason for that is that the Psalms are both poetry and song. It is not the poetry of Hallmark. We tend to think that poetry must rhyme. This is different. This poetry relies on repetition. Thoughts are rearranged from one line to the next. Poetry is something that communicates deep feelings and emotions. It is highly personal. It is why we look for the perfect card to give to someone we love. Poetry is an acceptable way to share feelings. When I was in college, I discovered how a boy felt about me when he handed me a small book of poetry that he had written and published!

The Psalms are songs. Music and poetry are closely linked. People are passionate about their favorite bands and musicians because they evoke such powerful and personal emotions. Music played an important role in the worship of ancient Israel just as it continues to do in the church today. People often argue about worship music precisely because it has such an emotional connection. The Psalms were originally meant to be sung. Somewhere over the course of the centuries the musical scores were lost. Chanting the Psalms today is a way of reconnecting the poetry to the songs.

Tonight we are exploring the Wisdom Psalms. There are many of them. These are the Psalms that contain teachings that are similar to the book of Proverbs but using the form of poetry and song. The Wisdom Psalms give instruction about how best to find peace, and live a godly life. Wisdom is celebrated as God's gift to God's people revealed through God's word.

Psalm 1 is a Wisdom Psalm. It is a poem about ethics, lifestyle and decisions. There are two main images or pictures in this Psalm. The first is that of two roads (or 'ways'). I am immediately transported back to my college days. College dorm rooms are notorious for being full of posters – a mixture of favorite movies, favorite bands, and provocative sayings – all amid photos of family and friends. You can tell a lot by a young adult by looking at what they have taped to their walls.

Over my college dorm room desk was wall size poster that looked something like this. On that poster were these words by the poet – Robert Frost: “Two roads diverged in a yellow wood, And sorry I could not travel both; And be one traveler, long I stood; And looked down one as far as I could;



To where it bent in the undergrowth.... I shall be telling this with a sigh, Somewhere ages and ages hence: Two roads diverged in a wood, and I; I took the one less traveled by, And that has made all the difference.” I bet you can guess. I was an English major – full of angst about what I was supposed to do with my life.

The roads in Psalm 1 signal the directions a person takes in their life. It doesn't have anything to do with the old Scottish song that contains the words 'you take the high road and I'll take the low road.' What is important here is who walks on each road and to whom each road really belongs. Along one road walk those who do not depend on God, those who rebel against God, those who mock God. This is the road that ultimately leads nowhere. Those who travel this road have difficulty recovering from tragedy, suffering and crises. Along the other road walk those who depend on God. This road belongs to God – who watches over it and its travelers.

It seems like it would be an easy choice, wouldn't it? Most of us don't knowingly choose evil or destruction. Remember the old question your parents asked you as a child, "If all your friends were jumping off a cliff, would you?" Most of us – would say, "Of course not." But life is more complex than that. The choices don't seem so clear cut. The world's "good life" seems an awful lot like the good life that God gives us – at least it is close enough to seemingly fool us. The world says "Don't break the law. Maximize your investments. Retire and live the good life." There's nothing wrong with that, is there?

Our dilemma can be seen in the Robert Frost poem I just quoted. We think we can travel both roads. Heck, we want to travel more than two roads. Let's not miss anything. Let's do it all. Let's take all the roads! The problem is in doing that we end up lost and unfocused. The Psalmist's remedy is to live a life that "delights" in the Lord.

And, how do we do that? How do we become connected to the author of all of life in a meaningful way? Whenever I visit a monastery or convent, I always come away with a mixture of respect and frustration. These are often communities of faith in which the praise of God is a 24/7 mission. I admire it! But, hey – I can't do that I have bills to pay, a family to care for, errands to run and on and on it goes. It is necessary to remember that God is our constant companion on this road of life. We are never alone.



The other image or picture in Psalm 1 is that of a tree. Those who depend on God are like that tree whose roots are sunk deep into the earth next to a lifegiving stream. Because of this the tree not only survives but even when the conditions change.

The Christian life is about discovering who you really are in relation to God and on the road which you travel. The truth is our life is not our own – as the world says. We are dependent on the grace of God which we cannot control. The Christian life is about sinking our roots deep into the lifegiving waters of our Baptism.

For us drinking deeply of that water means our lives are centered in regular worship, prayer and study of scripture. We are not able to do or be what God wants without sharing the road with other travelers. It is this shared journey with a community of believers that gives us strength no matter what comes along.

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
and we; We took the one less traveled
by, And God has made all the difference.
Amen.

