

Trees by Streams
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First Presbyterian Church of Waukesha
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Psalm 1

¹ 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;

² but their delight is in the law of the Lord,
and on his law they meditate day and night.

³ 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.

⁴ The wicked are not so,
but are like chaff that the wind drives away.

⁵ Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,
nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous;

⁶ for the Lord watches over the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked will perish.

John 17:6-19

⁶ 'I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. ⁷ Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; ⁸ for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. ⁹ I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. ¹⁰ All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. ¹¹ And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one. ¹² While I was with them, I protected them in your name that you have given me. I guarded them, and not one of them was lost except the one destined to be lost, so that the scripture might be fulfilled. ¹³ But now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves. ¹⁴ I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. ¹⁵ I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. ¹⁶ They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. ¹⁷ Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. ¹⁸ As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. ¹⁹ And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth.

Pray with me: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, Our Rock and Our Redeemer. Amen.

If you have ever had the good fortune to go to Maui, you may have stood under the canopy of an enormous banyan tree in Lahaina. The tree is breathtaking in its size and its scope, spanning an entire

block down by the waterfront, about 2/3 of an acre. On Google maps, it can be found near the Lahaina Harbor and its scope dwarfs cars in nearby parking lots. It is believed to be the oldest tree in Maui, planted in 1873, interestingly enough to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the arrival of the first Protestant mission.¹ While this one specimen's size is remarkable, something even more remarkable is less obvious. Near the tree are other, seemingly separate, smaller banyan trees. In reality, the original tree has dropped aerial roots from its far-reaching branches, which have grown in size until they appear to be independent trees. Instead, these trees form a web of roots both above- and below-ground. Water from the harbor travels far through these roots to the outermost trees and all are nourished. As you may have guessed, having been to Lahaina, this image sprung to my mind when I read our psalm for today.

Those who delight in the law of the Lord and meditate upon it day and night are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season and their leaves do not wither. If you've kept up with the drought conditions in this nation, you know that the lack of water is having significant implications on the growth of crops. Fruit is not growing in its season and leaves are indeed withering, not only signaling shortages for this year but death to the plants, ensuring shortages for years to come until new plants can become established. I've planted six apple trees in our yard. We received them when they were three years old and this is their fourth year planted – we are hoping for our first bumper crop this year. A plum tree I planted two years ago first blossomed this year but likely will not produce for another couple of years. And I've planted trees in dry years and failed to water them enough – only one of three Japanese cherry trees made it.

For any tree to flourish, it needs soil in which its roots can expand, ground that is not blocked in order for oxygen to reach the roots, and a water source for its roots. With a constant supply of all these things, trees will produce fruit in season and have beautiful, healthy leaves. To the psalmist the law of the Lord was this constant supply. The law strengthened the people so that, in times of difficulty, when assailed, they could withstand all troubles.

The psalmist was not saying if the people follow an exact list of rules, they will have happiness. It's also important to know that "happy" can also rightly be translated as "blessed." And "prosper" does not need to mean "to have wealth." The psalmist is saying that those who live in the manner God would have them live will be blessed and will thrive. In this way, the message is the same as Jesus' message in John: "I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world." Following God's word is equivalent to living in the manner God would have one live. We remember all the ways in which Jesus did not follow the law in the way the Pharisees thought he should, but instead in the ways God intended – remember, the Sabbath was

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Banyan_tree_in_Lahaina

made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath.² We speak of following the spirit of the law, not the letter of the law. It is following the spirit of the law, delighting in the spirit of the law, meditating on the spirit of the law, which makes people yield fruit, have full leaves, and prosper.

If we were to mix metaphors, we could say that the water of the streams from which the trees draw for their needs is the living water, the same which Jesus promised the woman at the well, the kind by which no one is thirsty again. Again, “I have given them your word.” This living water is the word. Because we are reading from John, we can also read this “word” as the same word that was in the beginning and was with God and was God and without which not one thing came into being. If we drink deeply as a tree with outstretched roots from this eternal source of water, then we can shun the advice of the wicked and stay on a path which is good. And if we have this regular source of water, if the living water, the word made flesh, is what nourishes, then how can our fruit be anything but abundant?

Of course, sometimes we don’t even notice that we’ve been planted by this stream, so caught up are we in what is going on everywhere else. Like the banyan, though, you sit among others whose roots tap into this same source and like the banyan you are connected, interwoven. You may have doubts or heavy grief which have made it hard to receive but, at any time, those around you are still taking it in and persisting to share with you what they have received. In those dry spells, others are still producing fruit, still branching out into the world (pun only partly intended).

As we head into next Sunday, when we will celebrate Pentecost, which I described last week as the “holy kick in the seat of the pants” which prompts us to go into the world and share the word, we look ahead to celebrating confirmation, too. A member will join us who has already been active in the worship and mission of this church. It’s possible that he has, for you, already shared what he has received. Because we’ll also be baptizing him, we’ll make promises as members of the church of Jesus Christ to guide and nurture him by word and deed, with love and prayer, encouraging him to know and follow Christ and to be a faithful member of this church. We can only uphold those promises if we, as a community, are drinking deeply from the living water ourselves.

Like the banyan tree, we are called into symbiosis with one another. Jesus has prayed, “Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.” Not the same, but connected; not necessarily agreeing, but always supporting. If we are actively seeking to live this way, how broad might our canopy be, how far into the world might we branch out? May each of your days and nights be filled with the ways of God so that your faith is vital and healthy, and so may it be for you and for me.

² Mark 2:27.

Let us pray: Lord, send us out into your world with you word, we pray. Amen.