



## A TREE IS NOT A FOREST

February 17, 2019, Sixth Sunday after Epiphany

Psalm 1

Kimberly L. Clayton, The Brick Presbyterian Church in the City of New York

---

Wendell Berry, agrarian, novelist, philosopher and poet, has written these words:

*Slowly, slowly, they return  
To the small woodland let alone:  
Great trees, outspreading and upright,  
Apostles of the living light.<sup>i</sup>*

It is by these *Apostles of the living light* that we are beckoned into the Book of Psalms. The very first psalm, Psalm 1, begins by acknowledging our universal human wish—to be happy; that is, to be blessed in the living of this life. The image, the towering metaphor for those who are indeed happy, blessed, and flourishing is that of outspreading and upright trees planted by streams of water. Here are trees that prosper: yielding fruit in its season, adorned with leaves that do not wither.

Many scholars believe that this psalm was intentionally placed, perhaps even intentionally written, as the theological preface to all the psalms that follow. Ellen T. Charry writes that the only other psalm in the entire psalter that has comparable rhetorical power is the final psalm, 150. In Psalm 1, she notes, warning prevails; at the last, celebration triumphs.<sup>ii</sup> Walter Brueggemann puts it only slightly differently. He stresses obedience more than warning in Psalm 1. Psalm 1 aims to help us begin all of our prayers in the confidence that there is a coherent world with a reliable God. A world in which the righteous, those socially aware and moral, will flourish if they devote themselves to the study of Torah and live according to God's teachings. In this coherent, reliable world, the opposite is also

\* Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation, the written accounts occasionally stray from proper grammar and punctuation.



assured: the wicked, those who scorn God's ways and live in cynicism, have no roots to ground them. Like chaff, they are blown away.

So, Brueggemann says, from the confident, coherent world of Torah in Psalm 1 to the wild, excessive doxology of Psalm 150, God's faithful people move from obedience to praise, from duty to delight.<sup>iii</sup>

Of course, we know that the coherent, reliable world of Psalm 1, where the righteous, the obedient flourish and the wicked, the scornful are punished is not always the way things turn out. So in between Psalm 1 and Psalm 150 are all manner of cries and prayers and songs to God: praise, lament, pleading and supplication for healing, for justice, for refuge, for rescue, for revenge, and thanksgivings, too. The psalms are by turns solos that hang in the air in singular beauty or pain; by other turns they are the voice of the community that rises and falls as the people go up to Jerusalem; the congregation's collective plea or praise echoing off the temple walls.

But it all begins succinctly, confidently with Psalm 1's clear, coherent world in which God's teachings lead the righteous to flourish, to know and live in true happiness. Like trees by streams of water, those of us who have come through the waters of the Exodus and up from the waters of baptism, those of us whose roots are set deep into the Living Water of God's Word will produce good fruit. We will green with life that dances when the wind of the Spirit blows among us.

Ellen Charry is right that Psalm 1 issues a warning. It shows us how the righteous and godly are to live, but does so by laying out the consequences of choosing otherwise. I so appreciate the movement described in verse 1; how it conveys the subtle ways we can be drawn into dangerous behavior, cynicism, scoffing, and despair. One slim verse shows the decline and fall of a person. The Common English Bible translation is especially helpful. It reads:

“The truly happy person



doesn't follow wicked advice,  
doesn't stand on the road of sinners,  
and doesn't sit with the disrespectful.”

Do you see how, by degrees, we can be drawn in? First we follow along, accepting questionable advice perhaps, or we trail around with the wrong kind of people. We are just following along, going with the crowd whose values are not the values of God. Whose behaviors and habits are not those found in the commandments. If we journey in such company long enough, we get comfortable enough to stand around with them; we linger there. And before we know it, we sit down; take our seat among them. This is for some a description of the subtle journey of addiction. For others, it is how we fell into the wrong crowd and therefore the wrong life. Psalm 1 warns us that this way can lead even unto death. Physical death or the death of beauty, joy, hope, mental or spiritual health. It is such a serious matter, that the psalm sounds the warning loudest at the end—its last word is “perish.”

I have great admiration for people who join a church these days. For everyone, including parents and grandparents who make a commitment to be part of the church and bring their children and youth here regularly. There are, after all, plenty of other choices for our time and commitments, among them many worthy and healthy ones, I know. So the decision to be here is not casual.

I do not know a place other than here, in the church, where people of every age come together to study and learn God's teachings week after week. Is there anywhere left in our society where people gather regularly to sing about ultimate matters? Those with the voice of an angel and those of us who are just trying to keep the tune in the bucket, join together in hymns of faith that comfort and console and challenge us. Here, we learn from each other and we learn together. Here, we commit to pray for each other through a hard time. Forgive each other after a rough patch. Pass the peace of Christ with open arms when all around us people are at each other's throats. Here week after week, year after year, we sit side by side in a pew, around the table—different ages, with our different worries and



hopes and states of health, and affirm that we are bound to each other because, in life and in death, we belong to God.

I have been reading a wonderful book that describes the “hidden life of trees.” The author, Peter Wohlleben, is forest ranger in Europe. In the opening pages, he describes stopping one day to take a closer look at some stones near a stand of old beech trees. He carefully lifted the moss that covered the stones and when he did, he discovered to his surprise, tree bark. These were not stones after all. He tried to lift one, but could not because it was attached to the ground in some way. When he scraped a bit of the tree bark with his pocketknife, he discovered green underneath: the green found only in chlorophyll, which makes new leaves green. Chlorophyll is also stored in the trunks of living trees. That meant only one thing: this wood was still alive! He then noticed the distinct pattern of the “stones”—a circle with a diameter of about 5 feet. He writes: “What I had stumbled upon were the gnarled remains of an enormous giant tree stump. All that was left were vestiges of the outermost edge”—with evidence that the tree had been felled four or five hundred years earlier. But without leaves, what could explain what he had seen underneath the bark? He concluded, “It must be getting assistance from neighboring trees, specifically from their roots. Clearly its roots were connected to neighboring roots—and the surrounding beeches were pumping sugar to the stump to keep it alive.”<sup>iv</sup>

Wohlleben goes on to explore why trees share food not only with their own species but some even go so far as to nourish their competitors. The answer is that there are advantages to working together. He writes: “A tree is not a forest. On its own, a tree cannot establish a consistent local climate. It is at the mercy of wind and weather. But together, many trees create an ecosystem that moderates extremes of heat and cold, stores a great deal of water, and generates a great deal of humidity. And in this protected environment, trees can live to be very old.”<sup>v</sup> He also explains how parent trees let only a certain amount of light through to their offspring, slowing their growth. Scientists have determined that such slow growth when the tree is young allows their inner woody cells to develop in a way that makes the young tree more flexible, resistant to breaking in storms and more resistant to fungi



where it is difficult to spread through their tough little trunks. Scientists have been studying how beech trees in an undisturbed forest work together to synchronize their photosynthesis so that all of them can flourish. Feet apart, with differing soil, light and water conditions, the rate of photosynthesis is the same for all the trees! Whether strong or weak, thick or thin, all members are using light to produce the same amount of sugar per leaf. This is taking place in their connected root system. “Whoever has an abundance of sugar hands some over; whoever is running short, gets some help, so that each tree can grow into the best tree it can be...for a tree,” he says, “can only be as strong as the forest that surrounds it.”<sup>vi</sup>

Trees planted by streams of water is the biblical metaphor for those whose life is grounded in God’s Word. Taking in the teachings of God strengthens us, encourages flexibility so that we can be resilient in the storms that come, and helps us resist that which would wound and weaken us. Rooted in Living Water, we are connected to one another so that each of us can grow into the best person possible, drawing strength from the community around us.

The Gospel companion to Psalm 1 today is Luke 6:17-26. The last time Luke’s version of the Beatitudes appeared in the lectionary was 12 years ago. People much prefer Matthew’s version, where Jesus stands on a mountain and bestows blessings—nine of them—to the crowd below. The setting in Luke is very different. Like a forest of beech trees, in Luke a great multitude of people have come from many places to hear Jesus and to be healed of their various diseases and troubled spirits. They are reaching out to touch him in order to be cured. Here, Jesus is not on a mountain, but stands among them on a level place. And because Jesus knows what the writer of Psalm 1 knows, he does not speak to them only of blessings, but also sounds the warning of woe.<sup>vii</sup> He is issuing a call to obedience and duty grounded in God’s teachings and pointing us toward God’s kingdom:

Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.  
Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.  
Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.  
Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you,

\* Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation, the written accounts occasionally stray from proper grammar and punctuation.



revile you and defame you on account of the Son of Man.  
Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in  
heaven;  
for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.

But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.  
Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry.  
Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep.  
Woe to you when all speak well of you,  
for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.

The *Apostles of Living Light* beckon us into God's teachings and the life of prayer. They set before us the way of obedience that leads to praise; and guide us from duty to delight. They root us to one another so that each of us can become the best possible person we can be and teach us to work together for the flourishing of the whole community. This is the way, they tell us, that leads to happiness. This is what it means to be blessed.

*Amen.*

---

<sup>i</sup> Wendell Berry, *A Timbered Choir: The Sabbath Poems 1979-1997* (New York: Counterpoint, 1998), 83.

<sup>ii</sup> Ellen T. Charry, *Brazos: A theological Commentary on the Bible Psalms 1-50* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, 2015), 1.

<sup>iii</sup> Walter Brueggemann, edited by Patrick D. Miller, *The Psalms & the Life of Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 194-195.

<sup>iv</sup> Peter Wohlleben, *The Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They Communicate* (Vancouver/Berkely: Greystone Books, 2015), 1-2.

<sup>v</sup> Wohlleben, 4.

<sup>vi</sup> Wohlleben, 16, 33.

<sup>vii</sup> At the 2019 gathering of The Moveable Feast, our NT scholar was Matthew Skinner. Matt said this: "I like the 'woes.' What if they are the illusions that kill us? The way by which death finds its way to us?"