

17th Sunday after Pentecost (Year B)

Psalm 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;
but their delight is in the law of the Lord,
and on his 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.*

*The wicked are not so,
but are like chaff that the wind drives away.
Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgement,
nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous;
for the Lord watches over the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked will perish.*

You and I are again in a season of transition. The most obvious one is the one taking place right outside. Labor day has come and gone, the weekends are becoming (at least a little) less crazy, the mornings and the evenings are beginning to have a subtle chill in the air, and fall has pulled up in the driveway and is approaching the front door. On a more particular scale, you and I are heading into another season of transition: this summer has come and gone, I have now been your pastor for well over a year, you and I have spent time getting to know one another, the honeymoon is over, and it's time for us to get down to business and take serious stock of what it is God is calling us to do and be right here and right now. It is another season of transition.

Although I am typically known as a "pastor," my official title is "teaching elder." And there is much merit to that title. After all, one of the most important roles of any pastor is to guide, instruct, and empower the congregation to live into its call to be the Body of Christ. But, I must admit, there are days when I feel like a more appropriate title to describe my calling is "teaching and/or learning elder" because there are certainly days when it feels like I've done more learning than I've done teaching.

The reason I say this to you on this particular morning is that something this "learning elder" has just now started to wrap his head around is the fact that life is really just one transition after another. When I was a teenager, I thought my life was nothing but one big transition from childhood to adulthood (and in that moment that was, in fact correct!). In that moment, I foolishly thought to myself, "I cannot wait to be an adult so I can get all this transition stuff over with!" Well, I've learned it doesn't quite work that way. Life is just one transition after another.

Often, as I suspect many of us have felt at some point, I get very tired from all the transitions. Some transitions we welcome and some transitions we resent. However, regardless of whether they are welcomed or dreaded, transitions can drain our energy and leave us feeling like we're not firing on all cylinders because things are moving so fast.

The child begins her first day of preschool and does not know what is around the corner. The father drops his teenager off on his first day of college and wonders where all those precious years went. The recently retired woman is waking up and realizing that she is beginning a new journey. The same sex couple that has been together for 20 years but has been forbidden from marriage steps out of the courthouse with a marriage license 20 years in the making. One spouse is watching the other disappear to Alzheimers. The married couple of 30 years has now helped the last child move out and they greet their newfound status as "empty nesters" with equal measures of fear, excitement, joy, and sadness.

I believe most of us in this room, if not all of us in this room, can identify with at least one of these feelings. The art of the transition is a practice that must be done by all of us and most of us spend our entire lives learning it. No amount of money or influence or power can save someone from the transitions that life throws at them. Transitions, both "good" and "bad" ones, are equal opportunity employers.

One of the things I've learned (or, more accurately, I should say *am learning*), is that when transitions happen, the single most important factor which determines the ability of which I am able to deal with said transition is the matter of where I have placed my roots, where I have made my foundation.

*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;
but their delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his 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.*

This psalm is the first of the 150 that make up the book of Psalms. It is a brief wisdom Psalm that contains within it one of my favorite images in all of scripture. A tree planted by an ever-flowing stream of water. Its leaves never wither, and those who are planted like it prosper.

Psalm 1 first and foremost affirms God's desire that we live deeply-rooted lives planted upon that which gives us life. When the winds of transition blow, the trees that are firmly rooted in that which gives them life are the ones that weather the storm best.

In the context of today's passage, the trees planted by streams of water are a reference to those who meditate on God's laws day and night. Now, fortunately for us, I do not believe that Psalm 1 is suggesting that we quit our jobs and spend all of our days and nights memorizing the book of Leviticus. That would be neither fun nor fruitful. Rather, I believe that Psalm 1 suggests that those who are firmly rooted like the trees by the stream are those who place themselves within the narrative of God's salvation and strive to act accordingly. The supreme way that we place ourselves within the narrative of God's salvation is by learning and sharing the stories of scripture which are, in fact, our story, God's gift to God's people. Through this meditation, we are taught to weather transition by remembering that Christ's summary of God's law is that we are called to love God with all of our heart and all of our soul and all of our strength and that we should love our neighbors as ourselves. These meditations are what make transitions fruitful and being firmly rooted in God's Word, both as individuals and as a worshiping community, leads to prosperity.

Now, this stream which we seek might look different to different people at different times. Perhaps right now, a way to get closer to that nourishing stream is by meditating on the scripture passages for the upcoming Sunday every night before you go to bed. Perhaps you can get closer to that stream by joining a bible study, or getting together in small groups in one another's houses to read scripture and pray. Perhaps, for you, that stream is in the form of encouraging your family to go to worship even when you don't feel like it. Perhaps that stream is in the form of spending 5 minutes at the beginning of your day thanking God for the breath in your lungs. That stream might look different to different people but its central theme is God. The stream that we seek, especially in times of upheaval and transition, is that which keeps you grounded in the God who gives you life and the God who has promised to hold you in life and in death.

Now it's all well and good to meditate on the law and love of God and to keep grounded when the status quo is all that is on the menu and we can spend a nice, quiet day with our feet in the cooling waters of the ever-flowing stream. But when transition strikes, when it feels like we're juggling *way* too many things, when it feels like we're wearing about 15 different hats on a given day, *that* is when we need help getting back to the stream.

But the good news for us who are seeking to *be the church*....transition is the business that we're in! Think about it...one of the church's primary functions is to accompany people during their life's transitions.

What happens when a child is born? The church gathers to rejoice and pray!

What happens when a person dies? The church gathers to cry and sing and comfort!

What happens when a couple gets married? The church gathers to bless and promise!

What happens when a youth gets confirmed? The church gathers to welcome and pray!

What happens when someone is going through cancer treatment? The church gathers to pray and cook and encourage!

Now notice, what is the first step in all of these typical life transitions? The church *gathers*. When transition happens, whether that transition is happy, sad, easy, tough, or any combination thereof, the church gathers. When transition comes, the church gathers to lead one another back to the stream. When a fellow sister or brother is in turmoil, we meditate on God's law and we welcome him or her to the stream where they can have their fill. And while we're there, we fill ourselves as well because we are all in this together. And what's more, when we find that we ourselves are far away from the stream, we know that there's a faith family that has gathered to welcome us back.

We gather as the people of God because God's intention is for us to be planted by the stream that nourishes us. When one of us leaves the stream, whether by their choice or by circumstances far beyond their control, when we see a friend or a family member or a complete stranger with withering leaves, we gather by the stream. We meditate on scripture and share with one another the stories of God's redeeming grace and how each and every one of us is in equal need of it. Each story of redemption, every scripture that tells a story, is a gulp of refreshing water that fills our bones with life, with courage, and with hope for that which God is so graciously offering us.

And, who knows? When we welcome others to come to the stream, we might find that the very process of doing so brings us closer to the water ourselves and, consequently, closer to each other and closer to the very God who calls us to the water in the first place.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.