

A Studious Tree
Psalm 1
Sermon by Dan Schrock
October 26, 2008

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. (NRSV)*

All of my adult life I've known that the Psalms are a unique and hugely important part of the Bible. I've known, for instance, that they have been a vital part of both Jewish and Christian faith, spoken or sung in worship by both Jews and Christians for thousands of years. Even today the Psalter, as we sometimes call it, continues to be a cornerstone of worship. Go to a chapel in nearly any monastery or convent anywhere in the world, and you will likely hear people chant, or at least read, selections from the Psalms at every prayer service. Churches that use the lectionary generally include four readings each Sunday, one each from the Old Testament, the epistles, the gospels, and the Psalms.

The Psalms have also been a part of my own life of faith. In college I belonged to a small group that decided to read and discuss a psalm at every meeting. We began with Psalm 1 and went sequentially until we ended at Psalm 150. Since we met every week on Wednesday night, it took us slightly less than three years to get through the Psalter. I am slowly realizing that the Psalms are great resources for my own praying. Increasingly, though not always, I find myself choosing a psalm and using it as the basis for writing a pastoral prayer to use in Sunday worship. If I have the time, I prefer to print the psalm out on paper with wide spaces and margins, and taking a pencil in hand, start marking up repeated words and phrases, key rhetorical turning points, and whatever else I notice, in order to understand the literary and theological dynamics of

this particular psalm. With that in mind, I then write a pastoral prayer based on the psalm. I've found this to be a great way to get inside a psalm and let it pray from within me.

And yet for all this I admit that I really don't know the Psalms. In none of the seven seminaries I studied at did I ever have a class on the Psalms. I own a few commentaries on the Psalms that I've bought over the years, but quite frankly, I haven't found them to be very inspiring or enlightening. One day in the church office I got so frustrated that I told Eleanor I wanted to pitch my Psalms commentaries in a bonfire and watch them burn. Why do these people have to be so pedantic? Why can't they get to the point? And where's their imagination?

Still, pedantic commentaries are not going to make me give up on the Psalms, and so today I want to begin a series of sermons on the Psalms, using resources other than those ponderous commentaries on my shelf. Since the Psalms are many, vast, and complex, we can't possibly do them full justice in a short series like this. Therefore to focus our exploration, I want to consider some of the images found in the Psalms. We can't even cover all the images, though I hope we can attend to some of the more important ones.

I want to focus on the images because it turns out that the Psalter's images are hugely important. To understand how they are important, let us turn back for a moment to the second commandment, found in Exodus 20.4 and Deuteronomy 5.8: "You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth." As time went on, Israel partly understood this commandment to mean that it should not make any graven images of God, whether in clay, stone, wood, fabric, or any other material. That is, the Israelites (and later on, Jews) generally stayed away from any visual art that tried to depict what Yahweh looks like. Therefore in Jewish synagogues you generally won't find paintings or statues of God.

However, Israel quickly figured out that the second commandment specifically names only certain kinds of *visual* art, but says nothing about *literary* art. That is, they figured out that the 10 commandments really function like fences for sheep. The commandments put boundaries on where the sheep can't go, yet leave a lot of room within those fences for the sheep to do anything they want. So also the 10 commandments. They prohibit certain things while letting us do all sorts of other things. Ah ha, said the artists of Israel, this commandment means no sculpture or drawings of God; but when it comes to literary art—to poetry and stories—we can write

anything we want! That means when we write something we can use all sorts of images for God. We can imagine God being like a storm, an eagle, a rock, a bear, or whatever we want.

And so it happened that in the Old Testament we find a profusion, a veritable riot, of metaphors for God and our relationship to this God.¹ The Psalms are a wonderful example of this. In every psalm we find one or more images that evoke something crucial about our life with God. This imagery uses concrete objects from daily life. It's real, down to earth, stuff like wings, arms, sun, lilies, and so on.

One author has demonstrated that in this profusion of metaphors, there are two primary images that wind their way through many of the Psalms: the image of pathway, and the image of refuge. Dozens of other images in the Psalms find their home in these two metaphors.² For the rest of this morning I want to begin exploring the image of pathway using Psalm 1, and in a few weeks I'll explore the image of refuge using Psalm 18.

So let us turn now to Psalm 1, using it as an entrée to the image of pathway. The first thing we might notice is that this psalm lays out before us two very different, contrasting pathways that we might walk on: the path of the righteous versus the path of the wicked. If you have an open Bible in front of you, you'll see that verses 1-3 describe the pathway of the righteous, while verses 4-5 describe the pathway of the wicked.

We'll start with the pathway of the righteous. According to verse 3, people who walk down this pathway are like "trees planted by streams of water," or at least that's the way the NRSV puts it. The Hebrew, however, actually says something a little different. In Hebrew, that word "planted" is a technical word that actually means "transplanted" (*√štl*). Consequently this is not a tree that started growing from a seed that randomly fell on the ground and happened to germinate on this particular spot. Instead this is a tree that someone deliberately transplanted to this location from a cutting or a shoot.³

Furthermore, the NRSV's phrase "streams of water" (*palgê mayim*) is not quite right either. A better translation is "channels" of water. That is, this is not some naturally-occurring stream out in creation, but a channel that someone deliberately dug in the ground to irrigate plants.⁴ The context is not someplace out in the wilds of nature, far away from human civilization; but instead the context is a cultivated garden nearby, or possibly in, some city or town.

You probably remember that the biblical world had a dry climate. Water was a hugely precious commodity because rain was spotty. So sparse was rain that in order for people to grow

much of anything, including food, they sometimes had to irrigate. Even kings irrigated. If you wanted to be a self-respecting, honest to goodness king, then you had to have a cultivated garden in your capital city, preferably in or near your palace. You dug a channel to your palace from the nearest river, prepared the soil, and then transplanted seedlings or cuttings from exotic plants found throughout your kingdom, especially plants that originally came from places you defeated in war. It didn't matter then whether it rained or not. The leaves of your plants would never wither in the hot sun because you had this irrigation channel that continuously supplied water to your plants and trees. This type of cultivated garden was therefore a status symbol of your power, wealth, and might.⁵

So here we have a primary image of righteous pathway. The secondary image behind that is of a transplanted tree continually sucking up irrigated water through its roots. And the tertiary or third-level image behind that is of a king who tends this fabulous garden. Let's put all this together. God, I suggest to you, is the kingly gardener in this psalm. God transplants people from various places around the world into this marvelous cultivated garden and provides for them unending water. What is this water? We find the answer in verse 2. The water that God provides through these irrigation channels is *tôrâ*, the "law." *Tôrâ*, as you likely know, is the Hebrew word for the fullness of God's instruction for us, the breadth of God's teaching that leads us to life. This tree is so strong, bears so much fruit, and never dries up because it drinks from *tôrâ*. The righteous person is one who studies *tôrâ*, who meditates on *tôrâ* at every available moment. This person, this tree, is deeply rooted and reliable. Thanks to *tôrâ*, she or he grows slowly but steadily, upward and outward, bearing fruit that others in the world may feast on.

Contrast this stunningly beautiful series of images with the pathway of the wicked. For wicked people, the psalmist selects a vastly different image. In verse 4 they are no tree, but mere chaff, helplessly blown hither, thither, and yon by the wind. The wicked have no roots, no fruits, and therefore no life. They are, in fact, dead and ephemeral, like chaff.

This first psalm of the Psalter functions as a doorway to the remaining 149 psalms. As we enter the Psalms and the rich, wonderful *tôrâ* that they contain, Psalm 1 warns us with stark imagery that the Psalter offers us a choice, and that choice will be a matter of life and death.

This psalm, as well as some others such as 119, hold up for us a spirituality of study. Here we see that if we want life and righteousness, then we will have to study the words, the teaching, of God. We must read, analyze, soak up, savor, and let our minds revel in the life-giving

nourishment of *tôrâ*. There is no substitute for the clear, refreshing water of *tôrâ*. Study is very much a part of the life of faith.

The final verse of Psalm 1 assures us that as we allow this life of study to grow, God the gardener will cultivate us lushly. It's a stunning image of shalom: we can be transplanted into God's garden, watered by God's channel of *tôrâ*, never withering, and bearing fruit in due season: fruit for the world.

Notes

1. I am deeply indebted for many of the ideas in this sermon—and in coming sermons in this series—to William P. Brown, *Seeing the Psalms: A Theology of Metaphor* (Westminster John Knox, 2002), which is not a commentary (!), but a synthetic treatment. On this particular point, see 3-4. So rich and compelling are these metaphors, says Brown, that that function like icons.
2. Brown, 15-53.
3. Brown, 76-77.
4. Brown, 74.
5. Brown, 67-70.