

“BLESSED”

Psalm 1

Matthew 5:1-12

ALL SAINTS SUNDAY

November 3, 2019

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For this All Saints Sunday, our annual festival day on which we Christians remember the saints who have died in the Lord, I depart from the Narrative Lectionary to focus our attention on two texts that speak to the so-called ‘living saints.’ As Martin Luther spoke to his generation some 500 years ago, we are all both saints and sinners. He posed it more theologically in Latin, *simul justus et peccator*, at the same time both justified and sinful. So, instead of extolling the state of our blessed ones who have entered the Church Triumphant, I would like to address my present generation of sinner (saints), who are still on their pilgrimage in this life.

As Chinese wisdom long ago had it, the journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step. For our Hebrew spiritual ancestors, the spiritual journey through this life begins with the First Psalm. Even though this Psalm stands as the first of 150 psalms in the Psalter, it could just as well serve as the last psalm, as it can also be regarded as a finishing touch to all the psalms. Listen again to the Psalm’s opening verse: ***“Happy are they who have not walked in the counsel of the wicked, nor lingered in the way of sinners, nor sat in the seats of the scornful.”***

This verse reminds me of Robert Frost’s famous poem, “The Road Not Taken,” where he writes of the choice that lay before him and, indeed, before us all:

**“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 . . .”**

Back to this poem a little later on. But for now, let us return to our psalm.

The first word of the Psalm, translated as ‘happiness,’ announces a hoped for sense of well-being, of wholeness, happiness, or, the word I would choose to use, ‘blessedness.’ It speaks of the person for whom **“God’s in His heaven — All’s right with the world.”** (From Robert Browning’s “Pippa Passes” p. 17). A number of years ago, a late, middle-aged woman, vacationing at the shore for the summer, eventually came upon our congregation and worshiped with us the remainder of her time among us. I still remember the occasion. After several Sundays with us, she expressed how lucky the people of this congregation were. She then wished that her home church could have an organist, choir, and worship experience such as ours. Lucky was the word she used. I still remember the way she said it, and I wondered if she really meant to say, ‘blessed,’ as a sense of surprise, unanticipated good fortune, or, better yet, a gift found in a place you least expect it.

The First Psalm elaborates a blessed way of life by first describing the person **“who walks not in the counsel of the wicked”** (v.1). As we travel the road of life in our contemporary culture, mass and social media bombard us with celebrities, experts, and commentators, who counsel, advise, and urge us in ways and methods that guarantee our happiness. They support their counsel with statistics, and document them by citing the latest polls or psychological studies. But you and I, hopefully, are not taken in. We are listening to a different drummer, or at least we’re learning to.

Neither do we **“stand in the way of sinners.”** A more colloquial way of putting it is to say that we don’t stand around or hang out with those who aren’t going anywhere. They are **“in the way,”** on the road, but each one **“stands,”** making small talk. They have big plans, and dream up major projects. But if we

listen long enough, we realize it is mostly empty air. And it stands to reason that we do not sit *“in the seat of scoffers.”* A seat is a place to deliberate, to make judgments, to render decisions. We appoint judges and elect candidates to seats.

And scoffers are those who look down on those who haven't the sense to take up a position. They sit in the company of know-it-alls. Theirs is a place of cynicism, gossip, and superficial witticisms. They hold nothing in authority except their own opinions. No judge sits over them. No counsel informs them. They are intoxicated with their verbal wine, and drunkenly survey the world, blearily reading into it their own confusion and malaise. The three rejected ways of living descend from what the psalmist verbalizes as *“walk,” “stand,” or “sit”* from activity to passivity, from the dynamic to the sedentary, sluggish immobility to internal imprisonment. The poet, Dante's lowest denizens of hell were encased in a sheet of ice, frozen in their sins. The movement from *“wicked”* to *“sinners”* to *“scoffers”* is from the bad actor to the habitual wrongdoer, to the person fixed in their ways and looking down on everyone else.

For our psalmist, the blessed way of life is then elaborated in two phrases. *“Their delight is in the law of the Lord, and they meditate on God's teaching day and night”* (v. 2). Here, we are brought into the spiritual realm of revelation — the Scriptures, or the Word of God, and Jesus, the Word made flesh. It is not a world of guesswork, superstition, and dogmatic demagoguery, but a personal world of relationship between God, who is involved in our life, and salvation, as revealed in the Law of Moses, the Good News of Jesus, and the preaching of the prophets and apostles. The way we take delight in this revelation is by meditation.

We don't just read it on the run, or just memorize a verse or two, but meditate. I wish we had a better word for it in English. Meditate gives the impression that it is something monks and nuns do in monasteries, or what we might do in contemplating a beautiful sunset or listening to music, which moves us beyond ourselves. It is something you do when you are really serious about your life, soul, and God. But here is a surprise. In the language of the psalmist, this word, *meditate*, has to do with slow eating, as when my mother reminded me to chew my

food slowly. It has been a while since we have had a family dog that revels in chewing on a bone. I always took delight in our dog's delight. He was totally absorbed in that one important thing. Meditate on that for a while.

And then the psalmist says that the meditating person is like ***“a tree, planted by streams of water, bearing fruit in due season, with leaves that do not wither. Everything they do shall prosper”*** (v. 3). Why a tree? Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Jesus use the same image. So does Genesis and Revelation, the Bible's beginning and ending. In the semi-arid Middle East, it was a conspicuous example of robust life, strength, beauty and long life. It is a great image. And I love the detail: ***“planted by streams of water.”*** A tree is an object of special care and cultivation, the knowledge and skill of our horticulturalist God. The tree is groomed to bear fruit and be perpetually green.

“The wicked are not so. They are like chaff the wind blows away. Therefore the wicked shall not stand upright when judgment comes, nor the sinner in the council of the righteous” (vv. 4-5). The wicked/sinner/scoffers with which the Psalm opens have perished. They have persisted in their lack of seriousness, their refusal to meditate. They have stubbornly maintained their course on roads that lead nowhere. Their ultimate end, ***“chaff,”*** is now contrasted with ***“tree.”*** Chaff driven by the wind is a perfect description for that which has no weight, substance or gravitas. Chaff is the dried up hulk of something that once lived, bore fruit, and brightened the landscape. The wicked are far from what they had been created to be. They are now at the mercy of breezes and winds. They have no roots and no life. There is nothing to them. They are defined now by what they are not. The men and women we started out with took different roads.

The terrifying conclusion to the life of the wicked/sinner/scoffer is the complete inability to be anything. ***“For the Lord knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will be destroyed”*** (v. 6). The final two lines lay out the end result of these two ways of life — the life of trees, and the non-life of chaff. The lead-off verb of this couplet, ***“know,”*** is pregnant with gospel, almost literally, for it was first used in the Bible as referring to an intimate sexual act, as

in *“Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived”* (Genesis 4:1). “Know” in common usage mostly has to do with information. However, in the Christian way, we believe that in Jesus, God “knows” us, and we in the Spirit can “know” God. Jesus, in His last conversation with His disciples in John’s Gospel tells them *“I am the way, the truth and the life”* (14:6). Jesus gave His life as an exposition, an incarnation, a presence of how this **“way”** works itself out in our lives.

Beloved people of God, we aren’t left to ourselves to figure this out, in working out the details of following Jesus. The **“way”** is not only the road we take to a destination, it is also the **“way”** that we live on this road. Psalm 1 gets our feet wet on the **“way”** of Jesus. We must read, meditate, and chew on the Scriptures in a companionship in which we acquire a feel for the Jesus **“way”** of blessing. The path that Jesus offers may not initially look appealing, but farther down the road of faith, (as some of our pictured “saints” have discovered), the more truth one finds. We are blessed not only in the end, but also along the **“way.”**

As Robert Frost’s poem concludes:

**“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.”**

AMEN