

“Soul Food”

Psalm 1 and James 3:13-18

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Rev. Joyce Kirk-Moore

San Dimas Community Church United Church

I mentioned before that I've been soliciting sermon topics, and I continue to invite you to tell me what you think would be good sermon subjects. One suggestion I've already received is this one: *Using and reading the Bible in day to day life. What can the Bible do for us? Why is the Bible important?* Not only does today's text speak to this topic, but I am also going to talk with the confirmation class this afternoon about the Bible. Both readings from Psalm 1 and James are wisdom passages. Psalm 1 follows the ancient Near East tradition of wisdom literature, and its poetry lends itself to murmuring, the low muttering sound which one does with words in a culture where there is no silent reading.

When the professor of Psalms, Robert Alter, who teaches at the University of California, Berkeley, pointed this out, I imagined those faithful Jews at the wailing wall that we often see in photos, murmuring their prayers to the remnant of their temple still standing in Jerusalem. In this Psalm we are drawn into the familiar metaphor of walking as “pursuing a set of moral choices in life.” To the metaphor of “walking” is added “standing,” then “sitting.” It's better to just walk on by those who offer bad counsel; it's important not to stand and listen; and by all means don't sit and take in a whole session of ill advice.

This is how Alter translates Psalm 1: ***“Happy the man who has not walked in the wicked's counsel, nor in the way of offenders has stood, nor in the session of scoffers has sat. But the Lord's teaching is his desire, and His teaching he murmurs day and night.”***

The Psalm says don't walk, stand, or sit in bad company, but rather to murmur or meditate on God's teaching. The word Alter translates as “teaching” is often translated “law” as in the translation Becky read. We tend to get worried when “law” is emphasized because it draws us into the old faith/works debate, but for Jews the “law” and relationship with God were connected. “Law” was not an objective “to do” list but a way to be in right relationship.

But back to Psalm 1. Another important metaphor in Hebrew literature was that of trees planted by streams of water. Remember that the psalmist is living in a semi-arid climate so any tree that flourished, that bore fruit, and that had evergreen leaves must be near a water source. Where are we planted? What and who are we near to each day? I've lived and worked in places where I almost died of thirst, places that sapped all that would enable me to bear fruit much less stay alive. I know spiritually that it is important for me to be near the life-giving water of God and church.

I was reminded of this this week. Once I got Tom home safe and sound, I seemed to collapse from physical and mental exhaustion. But even more, I began worrying more than usual about all the things I needed to do, waking up in the middle of the night thinking about problems that I simply cannot solve, both my own and others. On Wednesday when I learned my mother was to have surgery for possible cancer, all I could do was go to bed. I knew this overwhelming feeling was a spiritual problem. I knew I needed to get rooted, to suck up the nourishment from the true ground of my being. To have some soul food. This Psalm speaks to me about what I spend time thinking about, the things I murmur and meditate on day and night. When I look around and see all kinds of technology able to distract us at a moment's notice, it's easy to understand why information overload becomes stressful. We can't live in caves and most of us don't live in monasteries; we live in this world.

Yet I find that thinking about biblical wisdom or “wisdom from above” as James names it, is one way to free me from the overload and burden of too much going on around me. It is calming to meditate on God's word somewhat like the spiritual practice of *lectio divina*. *Lectio*

divina is practiced by allowing yourself to become silent and focusing for a few moments on your breathing or a prayer word or phrase. Then you turn to the text and read it slowly savoring each portion of the reading, constantly listening for the "still, small voice" of a word or phrase that speaks to you today. In *lectio divina*, God is teaching us to listen and to seek in silence. Take the word or phrase and memorize it, slowly repeating it to yourself, allowing it to interact with your inner world of concerns, memories, and ideas. Allow this inner pondering to invite you into conversation with God. I thought we might try a short version of *lectio divina* with our Psalm today. I invite you to join with me in some moments of silence and centering and then listen as I read part of Alter's translation of Psalm 1 and then dwell in silence for a few more moments on a word or phrase that may speak to you today.

“Happy the man who has not walked in the wicked’s counsel, nor in the way of offenders has stood, nor in the session of scoffers has sat. But the Lord’s teaching is his desire, and His teaching he murmurs day and night. And he shall be like a tree planted by streams of water, that bears its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither--”

I imagine this pondering or something like it was what Linnea Good was doing when she composed the song I sang to the children today. Trees have always touched in me a spiritual chord. I remember living in Kansas in the 3rd grade and studying in science about the tall Sequoia trees and longing to one day see them. When I finally did, it was a dream come true! There's a certain majesty about trees, trees that bear the test of time. Trees that allow for fire to clear the brush beneath them close to the ground without killing their evergreen boughs that reach skyward.

Trees that tell stories of death and resurrection as they lie fallen on their sides with tiny trees sprouting from their inward parts--old begetting new. Trees that are so big yet stand silently without imposing noise on the beauty around them. Trees that live long enough to provide protection for others from the elements, to shade us from the sun beating down on us. Trees that prosper because either their roots grow deep connecting them to deep truth, or trees whose roots are not deep but reach way out many, many feet so that their stability is a result of their outreach, horizontal roots connecting them to a vast expanse of land. How are we like these trees?

So to answer the question of why the Bible is important to our daily lives, for me it is because it connects me to the fundamental relationship of my life, the Holy One. It reminds me who I am and whose I am. It's not the only way we connect to God; we also connect relationally to God through the people who show us God's likeness and image. Yet, the Bible is one important way to connect.

I have not taken time today to explore in detail the scripture from James, but I would mention that it too offers a wisdom from above that is important to note and perhaps to meditate on in the days ahead. Hear once more from James: “the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.”

The Bible, its wisdom literature, and all its other literary genres are inspired story telling. They tell the story of God and human relationships; they tell the old, old story of God's redeeming love, and if we can retell the story then the forces of love, mercy, generosity and strength are called forth into being in the world. The importance of the Bible is that it is our soul food nourishing and sustaining us in the face of anything that we may face. May we meditate on the wisdom of God, day and night, so that we may feel God's story deep in our bones and be able to tell it and thus, offer soul food to a hungry world.