

- **07/17/2016 - Psalms of Orientation - Wisdom and Law – Rev. Seth D Jones ©**

- This week we start a 6 week or so examination of the Psalms. The beauty of the Psalms is that they cover every aspect of human experience. They provide a sort of reflecting pool for how we see the presence of God in our lives and the world, regardless of what the circumstances happening around us may be.
 - In the early church, the Psalms were considered a kind of proto- or pre-Gospel. In other words, the ancient church saw images and visions which pointed to the coming of Christ, and in the coming of Jesus, we see the fulfillment of those images and visions.
 - One of my mentors when I began my M. Div. program was a gentleman named Bill Rafuse, who pastored a church in the UP, MI. Bill was full of wisdom and every couple of years or so, he would pick a couple of CFTS students to sort of oversee and usher into the fields of ministry. I was fortunate to be one of his overseen. I tell you about Bill because he is an anomaly in the NACCC. Bill did not go to seminary; he is a self-trained theologian. He would say he doesn't know much, but no one I had met to that point had read more of the early church fathers and the history of the faith than Bill Rafuse.
 - Bill has a strong and profound devotional life, part of which he derived from reading the early church. Central to his prayer life is the Book of Psalms. He reads the entire 150 Psalms every month, then starts over again and reads them again. I believe part of his depth of knowledge and wisdom comes from this activity.

- Reading all the Psalms in a month is not a new exercise. It is pretty much the way of most monasteries and priories in the world. Many Catholic and Orthodox have, for many hundreds of years, read through the Psalms in a month. And most of the mystics of the church had this as a practice as well.
 - There is good reason to do this as a Christian.
- The Psalms were written over a long period of time and were pretty solidified by the time Jesus was born. More to the point, however, were how the Psalms functioned for the Jewish community of faith.
 - The Psalms are the prayer book for the Jewish faith, and prayer is how all of us orient ourselves toward God. If the Psalms were central to the faith when Jesus was born, then the Psalms were central to Jesus' prayer life as well.
 - A reading of the Psalms from start to finish would give you a wide sweep of human experience, and there are several things to recognize as we get into this series.
 - First, when we study the Psalms, we are really studying the nature of prayer to God. There are distinct surprises in them. If you are looking for rules for how to pray, you won't really find them here. Some Psalms praise God; some praise God's kingdoms in the world; some praise God's creation; some call for God's protection and comfort; but many of the Psalms are expressions of profound anger about circumstances; some are profound cries of abandonment and calls for God's return;

- some veer closely to questioning God's presence at all; some are expressions of profound anger towards God.
- Second, there are several ways to divide up the Psalms.
 - There are natural divisions - the Psalms are actually 5 books, a reflection of the liturgical season of the Jewish tradition, and also a reflection of the first five books of Scripture - the *Torah*.
 - There are historical/textual divisions into communal and individual praises, laments, celebrations, and hymns.
 - And there are more intuitive, accessible divisions. That is what we will be using, from Walter Brueggemann primarily.
 - Psalms of orientation towards God
 - Psalms of disorientation in our relationship to God
 - And Psalms of New Creation
- And third, there may be times when we pray the Psalms alone as Christians and in our highly individualized Western world, but the Psalms are first and foremost a book of prayer for the community of faith. This is something we do together; the Psalms are a binding and enwrapping book of people who seek the presence of God together.
 - SO this is not so much a 6-week sermon series on the psalms but a 6-week series on prayer.
- Psalms 1, 37, and 131
- Any spiritual journey must begin with what we understand to be foundational for what we believe and trust and expect. What is the foundation of our faith and belief? How do we orient our souls and minds and hearts to the One to whom we have devoted our lives?
- So we begin with God's wisdom and God's *torah*.
 - *Torah* has several meanings:
 - God's law - what God says we should do and what we are supposed to do to stay in relationship with God
 - The books of God's Word - the first 5 books of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. The books of history and the Prophets are often thought of as commentary on the Torah.
 - And *torah* is also thought of as God's teaching or instruction. This is the meaning we intend today. It encompasses the other two ideas, but also is its own thing.
- Let's all turn then to **page 489** in your pew bible so we can look at Psalm 1 together.
- Let's all read together the first line of this Psalm..."*Blessed is the man...*"
 - Put your finger at this page and turn to **pg 4** in the New Testament. Look at verse 5:3. How does Jesus begin the Sermon on the Mount?
 - Just like we have code for how we speak among ourselves about things we all know about, so also did the Jewish people. Whenever someone said, say, "*My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?*" it was code referring to all of Psalm 22.

- “The Trinity” is a kind of Christian code speaking to the nature of God we glean from the New Testament.
- So when Jesus begins speaking at the Sermon on the Mount and begins with “Blessed are...”, everyone who heard this, particularly the disciples, who all would have been steeped in the worship of the day, would hear the code for Psalm 1. Jesus is intentionally reconstructing the foundation, the orientation that Psalm 1 is pointing us to. So let’s return to our Psalm for the day. (Read out loud together?)
- Part of my hope in focusing on the Psalms is to recover for us a First Testament view toward Jesus, to expand our focus into the foundations of Jesus’ faith, rather than simply focusing on our faith in Jesus all the time.
 - What I am hoping is that you begin to hear what Jesus is doing to some of the Hebrew Testament ideas, how he is turning them inside out and altering them, and thus also altering ideas of how we think about God.
 - I also hope to show that nothing Jesus says is antithetical to the Hebrew Testaments; rather Jesus is reinterpreting and reorienting the Hebrew people and us into a new understanding of God.
- Let’s look closely at Psalm 1 then. This is the first Psalm - it tells us that the Psalms are an instruction book. We are supposed to learn something here. We are supposed to walk with God into a way of knowing and a way of being that requires - what does it say? Meditation on the law.
 - Psalm 1 demands that we choose a path. We cannot be in a little bit of a relationship with God; we are either “all in” or “all out”.
- Once we are ‘all in’ there are issues and concerns that arise and the Psalms cover those, but the relationship begins by orienting ourselves toward God. We do that by rejecting the way of wickedness.
- We reject wickedness in several ways:
 - By taking delight in the wisdom and teaching of God
 - By meditating on God’s wisdom and teaching day and night
- This is what grounds us and roots us into the way of God - Ps 1:3. We become like a tree that is well-rooted and fruitful. This is what righteousness means in Scripture.
- Notice that Jesus uses a similar way of speaking in the Sermon on the Mount. Turn back and look at, first verses 13-14. *“You are the salt of the earth...You are the light of the world.”*
 - But look further. Read verses 17-20. We are called to the righteousness of God. We read this and think, *“Well, great, Jesus, but how can my righteousness exceed the ones who say they are the most righteous of all, the scribes and the Pharisees?”*
 - Jesus has already told us by pointing us to Psalm 1. Delight in the Lord. Meditate on God’s word daily.
- We can also get information from the other Psalm Jesus references in the Sermon on the Mount. In Mt 5:5, Jesus says *“Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.”*
 - Turn to **page 511**, and look at verse 11 in Psalm 37. Again we see something about delighting in what the Lord has given to us. But Psalm 37 is also a wisdom Psalm about righteousness and how to be righteous.

- It is quite long, but look at verse 1. If we are called by Jesus to be even more righteous than the scribes and Pharisees, look how that begins. “Fret not...” Let go of your anxiety. Anxiety about the world is worrying about things which are transient. God is not transient. This call against anxiety is echoed in Jesus’ words later on in the Sermon on the Mount, isn’t it? In Chapter 6, verses 25-33.
- We live in an anxious world, but Psalm 37 and Jesus both call us to be the non-anxious presence in a worried, panicked, confused world. This is part of being righteous.
- But there is more. Do you begin to see that our faith is not just about a set of beliefs and assertion of doctrines? That is only a foundation and touchstone for what is really going on - discipleship into a devotional life of prayer grounded in God’s teaching and God’s wisdom to live a life that glorifies what God has done for us through Jesus Christ.
- But we were talking about righteousness and what it looks like.
 - No anxiety
 - Then verse 3 - *“Trust in the Lord and do good...”*
 - *Befriend faithfulness!*
 - Verse 4 - *“delight in the Lord...”*
 - Verse 5 - *“commit your way to the Lord...”*
 - Verse 7 - *“be still and patient...”*
 - Verse 8 - *“refrain from anger...”*
- This is what Jesus is pointing us to when he references Psalm 1 and Psalm 37. It is so important that we understand Jesus is speaking like a prophet. He is speaking out of a particular tradition and he is speaking God’s word into a particular world.
 - This is what prophets do. Without understanding this first, we do not understand what Jesus is also trying to say to us as well.
 - This then is the trajectory of how we begin to orient ourselves toward God.
 - We are called by Psalm 1 to the wisdom and teaching of God and given the choice to follow with our entire being. To not follow God is to choose a way that moves like a drunken person through this life. This is how the Book of Proverbs, another text of the wisdom tradition, speaks about a life without God.
 - There is no direction and no reference point. The confession of Israel is
 - *“Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might” (Deut 6:4).*
 - In other words, there really is no other choice if we are looking to find peace and hope and guidance. Or rather, our only choices are God’s way or one I make up on my own. The one I make up on my own is a mess and leads, as Psalm 1 and 37 tell us into wickedness and evil. How could we know what is good and evil if we weren’t grounded and oriented toward the sole definition of the good, namely God and God alone?
 - Psalm 37 defines further the nature of our righteousness.
 - *No anxiety, trust in God, delight in God, commitment to God, stillness and patience before God, and refraining from anger with others.*

- Just so we are clear, though, there are always ways for evil to entrap us, to lead us astray. This is what Jesus is speaking to in the synagogues and to the crowds in Israel - the trap the faith of the day has fallen in. The dark side of righteousness is what? Wait for answers...
 - Pride. The result of the administration of the faith by the Pharisees and the scribes is the pride of righteousness, lording it over others in order to puff one's self up.
 - Righteousness that leads to pride cannot be the righteousness of God in this world. The presence of pride means the orientation and grounding of one's faith has radically altered, even without one's knowledge. The way that Psalms 1 and 37 call us to has led to exactly the place those Psalms warn of when we uproot ourselves from being focused on God.
- And so Psalm 131, another of the Wisdom Psalms, another Psalm of Orientation, provides an antidote, a guidepost in the road to righteousness and following God's path.
 - It is on **page 574**. Let's read it together.
 - Humility and the awareness we can never know enough is the guardrail, the breakwater, against pride.
 - Remember Jesus with the little child? In Matthew 18, he tells us to become like little children, which would have echoed Psalm 131 for those who heard him say this.
 - But look closely at this Psalm. The awareness of humility is at once how we treat one another and also how we treat ourselves. We are at once child and parent on this path to God's righteousness. Jesus, of course, is the one who justifies us in our faith journey.
- The danger is believing we achieve or are granted God's righteousness by whatever we have done right. The pride of self is the storm surge that overturns our raft in the rough seas of this life. This is why I am speaking in terms of orientation rather than what we do. We orient ourselves toward God; we ground ourselves in the teachings and wisdom of God so that we become like that tree by the flowing waters, and take delight in the ways of God that we constantly commit ourselves to every day and night.
- It is, as Psalm 131 says, how we calm and quiet our souls.
 - Amen
- Next week we will look at how we orient ourselves toward God through God's creation in Psalms
- The wisdom Psalms, of which these 3 are representative, help us understand our orientation toward God.