

Easter 07 B 2018  
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## *“The Path to Blessedness.”*

I almost never preach on the psalm appointed for a given Sunday, but today is different, because today’s psalm is Psalm 1. It’s the first in a collection of 150 psalms. And I’ll let you in on a secret: It’s *not* by accident that it’s the first psalm. Whoever edited the collection of psalms *wanted it* to be the first, so it must be something special. And that’s why I want to talk about it today.

But before I do that, I need to bring you up to speed on something. Frequently, a single verse of scripture can contain two or more bits of information, that people might want to look at separately. Well, the way we distinguish one bit of information from the others— that are contained in that same verse – is by adding a letter of the alphabet to the verse number.

For example, Psalm 1, verse 1, contains three different thoughts or ideas.

“Happy are they who have not walked in the counsel of the wicked” is the first thought, and it’s designated as verse 1a.

“Nor lingered in the way of sinners” is the second thought, and it’s designated as verse 1b.

“Nor sat in the seats of the scornful!” is the third thought, and it’s designated as verse 1c.

I’m explaining this to you, because I’ll be using those designations and I want you to know what I’m talking about. So, now let’s talk about Psalm 1.

It begins, obviously, in this way:

Happy are they who have not walked in the counsel of the wicked... (again, that’s vs 1a).

But that first word, “happy,” doesn’t do justice to the depth of meaning that’s being conveyed in the original Hebrew language. So, let’s do a word-study and see what nuggets we might unearth.

So, the Hebrew word for “happy” is *ash-rey*, and it can indeed mean “happy,” but it can also mean “blessed,” or it can even mean “approved” – and in this context, it probably means approved of God.

However, and digging a bit deeper, *ash-rey* is derived from another Hebrew word that describes a piece of rope that is stretched out so tightly that it's absolutely straight. So, keep that image in your mind.

So, verse 1a begins with the word "happy." But it ends with the word "wicked." In Hebrew, that word is *rasha'im*. And while it can certainly mean "wicked," it's often translated as "ungodly," or even sometimes as "living in the way of evil."

And just as *ash-rey* ("happy") was derived from another Hebrew word, so too is *rasha'im*. It's derived from the Hebrew word *rasha*. And *rasha* means to "wander off the path," or "to meander about," whether on purpose by accident.

Now comes our word-study payoff.

If we were all ancient Hebrew people, and I was reciting verse 1a to you all (and pronouncing the words correctly), two things would happen in your minds at the same time.

First, you would immediately notice that the first word, *ash-rey* ("happy"), and the last word, *rasha* ("wicked") sounded a lot alike, and so you would pay attention to them.

And then, second, you would realize that, with those two words, the author is contrasting two states of being. That at the beginning of 1a, the author is describing someone who is walking a path as straight as a taut piece of rope. And at the end of 1a, the author is describing someone who is walking a path that meanders all over the place. The former is labeled “happy” or “blessed,” and the latter is labeled “wicked” or “evil.”

Now this is where the rubber meets the road: As the followers of God, we definitely want to be on the straight path! But how do we do that? Well, the rest of the psalm tells us how, by providing three descriptions of the sorts of people who walk the straight path.

The first description comes in verse 1b. These sorts of people do not linger “in the way of sinners.” Or, as my Mom used to say to me: “Jimmy, I don’t want you playing with *those* boys; they’re trouble.” So, people who want to walk the straight path, don’t hang around with people they know who are “trouble.”

And the reason is simple: Because there’s nothing more likely to make us to make bad decisions, than hanging out with other people who also make bad decisions. Because, when we’re around them, we absorb their values. And whether it’s because we want

their approval, or we simply want to be like them, when we spend time with people who are trouble, we get in trouble too. It's like the old saying: "If you lie down with dogs, you'll get up with fleas."

And, of course, the opposite is also true. The psalm doesn't say it, but it's implied: If we hang out with people who are "happy," who are "blessed," or who are "approved of God," we are more likely to become like them.

And so, if you're a parent, and you're needing a reason to make your kids come to church on Sundays, it's because you want them to be spending time with other kids who are, more likely than not, "happy," or "blessed," or "approved of God." Am I right?

Now, there's a second description of those who want to walk the straight path, and it's found in verse 2b, where it says that "they meditate on the law of God day and night."

The Hebrew word for "law" is "Torah," which is a designation for the first five books of the Bible. And in those five books are the stories: of creation; of Noah and the flood; of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; of Moses and Miriam and the escape of the Hebrew people from Egypt; of their wandering in the wilderness, and their arrival on the banks of the promised land.

But in the Torah are also the stories of the laws that God gave to his people: of the tablets of stone with the Ten Commandments, and the detailed explanations of how to live as the people of God.

In other words, those who want to walk the straight path *know their own story*, and the stories of God, and the stories of their faith.

And the third description of the people who walk the straight path, is a metaphor, and it's found in verse 3a: "They are like trees planted by streams of water." In other words, they are like trees planted in a good location. And their roots reach down deep into the soil for water and food. And those deep roots mean that they can withstand strong winds. And their branches provide a home for all sorts of animals and birds and bugs, as well as those branches providing good fruit for those who are hungry.

As for the psalm's descriptions of the "wicked"? It's there, but I'll leave it for you all to explore those on your own.

And so, on the one hand, there are those who are happy, who are blessed. And on the other hand, there are those who are wicked, who are evil.

But, so what?

The thing is, there are actually two ways to approach this psalm. The first is to see it as a declaration; that this psalm is describing how the world is. And that you are either on one side or the other – you’re either “happy” or “wicked” – and there’s not much you can do about it. So, deal with it!

But the second way of approaching this psalm is to see it as an invitation. As an invitation to be counted among the “happy,” to counted among the “blessed,” to counted among those who are “approved of God.” It’s an invitation to do the sorts of things, and be the sorts of people, who walk the straight path.

And I like this notion that Psalm 1 is an invitation, because that means that there’s room for *all* of us. Because it’s an invitation for all of us discover more about God, and an invitation to grow our roots longer and deeper, and an invitation to hang out with God’s friends. And that’s a wonderful thing!

And seeing Psalm 1 as an invitation, reminds me of what Jesus did as he traveled about: For example, stopping by a lake to chat with some fishermen; or looking up into the tree to find Zacchaeus, the tax collector; or meeting late at night with the

Nicodemus. And so on. And in each instance, Jesus invited those people to follow him. And do you know what? They didn't need to be perfect; they didn't need to have it all together; all they needed was the willingness to risk spending time with him. And those that did, found that they *were* "happy," and that they were "blessed."

And the same invitation is there for us. Unfortunately, we can't hang out with Jesus himself. But we *can* hear what he said, when we read the Bible. And we *can* get to know him in prayer. And we can hang out with people who know what it is to be his friends, and who know what it is to be blessed. And as we do, we'll find our roots going deeper, and our faith growing stronger, and we will be sustained when times are tough, and we'll be able to offer shelter to others when times are good.

But most of all, we will be "happy." We will be "blessed." And we will be "approved" of God. And isn't that what we want? I think so.

Amen.