

Woodside Presbyterian Church
July 26, 2015
The Rest of the Story: Psalm 1
“Oasis for the Soul”
Rev. Gloria Yi

At first reading of Psalm 1, we may think that we just received a formula for how to obtain a blessed life: be righteous by not associating with the wicked and by meditating on the law of the Lord. Bam, done, I’m blessed, or is it more like where is my blessing? Did it work? No? Was it because I sat with the mockers, or stood with sinners, or walked in the counsel of the wicked? Or was it because I didn’t meditate the entire night and the entire day? Formulas for blessing do not work. We kind of know that from studying Job. So let’s read this Psalm more carefully (and hopefully there is a reason for me to keep my job).

But first, as we continue our sermon series of the Rest of the Story, let’s see what some more famous theologians have said about the Psalms: The book of Psalms might well be called a little Bible. In it is comprehended most beautifully and briefly everything that is in the entire Bible. (Psalms Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, James Luther Mays, p.1).

As you read through the psalms you will discover that it is full of highs and lows, hopes and fears, despairs and aspirations, agonies and joys –it is a roller coaster ride through the stuff of life. And the first chapter of the Psalms is an introduction to this entire book... unlike most of the rest of the chapters, the first chapter is not a prayer or praise, rather it is a beatitude. (paraphrase from Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 1, Psalm 1, *Pastoral Perspective*, Charles M. Mendenhall, pp. 344-349).

And that first word, blessed is better translated happy from the Hebrew word, esher. In other words, Happy is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers. But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night (Psalm 1:1-2). And that one word changes how we read this psalm. For here, God gives us the instructions on how to find happiness while living in this blessed and cursed world.

Some 2,500 years or so after the origin of Psalm 1, we are still thinking about and talking about happiness. It seems that no amount of materials or no super speed of information travel nor any amount of plastic surgery can bring forth happiness. And so we are baffled every summer as many of our teenagers go and return from the Bahamas trip echoing a similar testimony of how people in poverty could be so very happy. Our academics have come up with disciplines in the social sciences called “happiness studies,” and there is now a *Journal of Happiness Studies: An Interdisciplinary Forum on Subjective Well-Being*. And these journals have serious subscribers and they are able to hold annual conferences discussing quality of life. Happiness scholars are interested in

what people think and feel about various aspects of their lives – income level, relationships, health, career, and soon. (https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2452, Commentary on Psalm 1, J. Clinton McCann).

This is the best that the world can do to approach happiness. It is no wonder that many of our friends and colleagues seek a more meaningful existence and subject themselves to discipline such as a 12 step program, a strict diet, yoga classes, mandatory family reunions, trying to retire by age 50, and so on. (paraphrase from Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 1, Psalm 1, *Theological Perspective*, Rebecca Blair Young, pp. 344-348).

The Psalmist approach to happiness is quite different. It is not about wealth, health, or control. First and foremost happiness is being in the presence of God. The most desired outcome of happiness is to be watched by God: “For the Lord watches over the way of the righteous” (Psalm 1:6). Being watched in every sense of the word, being guarded by God, protected, given clear boundaries, but most particularly as my daughter would sometimes cry out to me, “pay attention to me”, being watched is being paid attention to, being loved—and this is not a reward but an outcome of a relationship, and at the source of our soul’s happiness is this very presence of our God’s love in our lives. As much as we fear God’s watchful eyes, our souls desire to be watched by the only One whom we can truly trust, the One who can give us the red light to stop when we have to and the green light to go when we have to, and the One who stays with us and waits with us on that confusing amber light.

In our lower story, the psalmist instructs us that we get a glimpse of this type of happiness when we delight in the law of the Lord, and makes the claim that our happiness comes from delighting in scripture. How often have you and I associated studying scripture, meditating in the Word, having Bible discussions, listening to sermons as delightful experiences? For the psalmist, happiness is having the time to read and study scripture, not only in search for some sort of prescription from God (although this is desired), but also just to delight in the Word as if you were reading a love letter from God.

When I lived in Maryland for 6 months prior to moving back to Pennsylvania, Steve and I spent a lot of money on our cell phone bills, but we also had a few old school moments of writing notes to each other. Every time I received a note, I practically memorized every single word, obsessing about the meaning of each phrase, delighting in the conclusion that I was loved. And here in this book is God’s love letter to us, more than a guide to everyday living it is at its core a love letter to us, yet we dread it, we are afraid of it, we are confused by it, and we would rather have an affair with Max Lucado, or Eugene Peterson, or Andy Stanley’s words than the holy book. Max Lucado, Eugene Peterson and Andy Stanley are awesome friends to have, but you need as your base, as your foundation, as your lover, Jesus, the incarnate Word of God and the Holy Scripture, the written Word of God. If you read nothing else this summer, I hope you read the

entire book of Psalms. Meditate on the words, ask the Holy Spirit to help you delight in the Word of God, and spend some time in the presence of God.

For when you do this you may truly find an oasis for your soul, you may truly become as happy as “a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season, and whose leaf does not wither, whatever he does prospers” (Psalm 1:3). To delight in God’s law is not just meditating and reflecting on God’s law, it is a deep continuous steeping of yourself in God’s word—like a tree that is firmly planted by streams of water—as if your life, survival and prosperity depended on the Word as the plant depends on its source of water. And your happiness is not dependent on how much water you can get or what other bounty from the earth you can reap, but the happiness of the tree planted by streams of water is that it yields its fruit in season. Hear the word of God: the happiness of our soul is not so much on what we can get, but on what we can contribute, the fruit that we bear (do you remember the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control); these are the fruits that we bear. And the leaf that does not wither to provide breath for others to breathe in the oxygen of life, the oxygen of God’s word through the sharing of the gospel: this is happiness for our soul.

This past week we had 42 preschool children experience Sailing God’s World. It was our first time offering a camp for only the very young preschool children, and we paid much attention to create a safe and fun environment. Our teen helpers rocked it, as they so very lovingly cared and helped the children. Our teachers developed age appropriate fun camp activities, and we had five lessons on Jesus’ love. I saw the Holy Spirit at work throughout the entire week, as I saw the connection between the Bible lessons and all the activities (none of it done intentionally because I’m not that well prepared). As an example, when we scrapped the byob (bring your own bike) and switched to byob (bring your own blanket) to do a glow in the dark scavenger hunt with a flashlight, the bible story asked for a story to be told in the dark with a flashlight—I know you are not too excited about this, but I delighted on studying and presenting the gospel to the little children. I must have been so delighted about God, that some of the children started referring me as the God Woman to their parents.

As a pastor, as a God Woman, as a follower of Jesus, what gave me the greatest happiness was when I was able to guide the little ones in the message of the cross and that Jesus loves them even when they do wrong. And then to lead them to receive Jesus in their hearts: this is where I find my oasis for my soul.

You may not be a pastor, but about 50% of you can be God Women, and 100% of you can be followers of Jesus. Then you need to be like a tree planted by streams with green leaves that do not wither—green leaves that are ready to share the gospel of life with the people that God sends you, not because this is your payment for blessings from above, but because this is the source of happiness for your soul. As a staff and session we’ve been reading this book together, Small is Big, Slow is Fast. And in it we’ve discovered that evangelism begins with recognizing who your people of peace are based on Matthew 10 (you remember the story of Jesus pairing his disciples and sending them

out to preach the gospel, and when the person welcomed the disciples then their peace rested in the home, if not then the peace returned to the disciples), thus a person of peace is someone God has prepared ahead of time for us to encounter and they can be recognized by these characteristics: welcome us, like to be with us, and attempt to serve us in some way. Some of you have already met your person of peace, some of you have been hanging out for years with your person of peace and have ignored the Holy Spirit nudging you to share your story. Give yourself the opportunity to find out whether God truly gave you a person of peace or a person of unpeace.

One final note on the tree simile: please note that the fruit yields in season. Each of you may be going through a particular season: maybe it is the season of kindness or joy, or patience or self-control, gentleness or love... I think that sometimes we get frustrated with ourselves and our loved ones who you are sure are followers of Jesus and yet you just don't see their fruit, maybe the problem is that it isn't the right season yet. This too, we hand over to God, this too, is an indication that indeed our happiness is truly dependent on God's grace in our lives, on God's timing, on God's season, on the One who plants us by streams of water.

So finally, happiness according to the Psalm is obedience to God. And one cannot obey God, if he chooses to walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers (Psalm 1:1). So we come full circle, this is a book of instructions, but far more than just instructions, it is also a love letter from our Lord to us, it is a description of God's grace being poured out to us, it is the way to finally and eternally be happy, be blessed! Amen.