

Sermon: Planted by Water

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles PC, Feb 13, 2022)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

When I was a teenager, seventeen I think, I went on a canoe-camping trip with a group of classmates organized by my high school history teacher. The trip was to take about a month, starting from Lake Superior near Thunder Bay, travelling down the Missanabie River, and ending eventually at the town of Moosonee at James Bay. It was one of those life / character defining trip that is adventurous and dangerous enough which prompted my mother to leave me with an all too serious instruction to 'come back alive!'. I did 'come back', had so much fun so that the following year, I went back to do the same trip all over again.

In the midst of a regimented routine of paddling 8 hours a day, we traversed through challenging white waters, portaged when needed, and camped when getting dark. We witnessed a midnight cloud funnel, encountered many wildlife, fought off a black bear (who was stealing our food), and survived an actual tornado which came awfully close to us. That rugged landscape, or waterscape to be more precise, is truly a sight to behold.

One thing that left a strong impression on me was trees all along the river bank. Trees of various kind, shapes and sizes, with their exposed roots planted on rock face or deep onto the shore. Some standing straight and tall, others perching on impossible looking angle, all were singing their welcome to the occasional travellers down the river.

Of course, in that rugged landscape of northern Canada where water is plentiful, trees do grow just about everywhere, not simply along river banks. The same does not apply to the dry terrain of Israel and Palestine. Strong, tall trees only really spread their branches if they are nearby a river or another steady water source. Thus a tree planted by water becomes a frequent metaphor to a life of faith.

In Psalm 1, a life fuelled by the words of God is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In Jeremiah 17, those who trust in the Lord are blessed, like

trees planted by water, that neither fear heat nor become anxious by drought. They stay green and remain fruitful throughout.

It is not difficult to understand why the imagery of a tree is used often in the Scripture as a life of faith. Trees reach both down and up; they plant roots deep into the ground and send trunks and branches upward, as if in a posture of worship. In a sense, they are both grounded and growing, stationary and on the move, not sideways but down and up. In that movement of stretching and reaching, trees seek what gives them life—water, nutrients and sun.

Yet in both the Jeremiah passage and Psalm, one cannot ignore the flip side of a blessed life—of those who do not live by faith. They trust not in God, but in their own abilities. Instead of turning towards their creator, they turn their hearts away. They desert the commandments of the Lord, thus live in wickedness and sinfulness. In Jeremiah 17, “They shall be like a shrub in the desert, and shall not see when relief comes. They shall live in the parched places of the wilderness, in an uninhabited salt land.” In Psalm 1, they are like chaff that the wind drives away, and they will not be able to stand in time of judgement, nor in the congregation of the righteous.

Both passages support and echo that of the Torah, the Law of God in Deuteronomy 28 and Leviticus 26, where blessings and curses are spelled out in succession, in great detail, and in increasing magnitude. The main theological thrust of those passages is a well known and well accepted doctrine—obedience to the Law of God results in blessings; disobedience results in punishments. Yet life is never that simple, nor the Scripture that straight forward.

One of the great mysteries of life is the question of why the wicked succeed in life, seemingly in great numbers. The flip side of that is why the righteous suffer, seemingly all the time. If you are expecting me to provide you with a satisfactory explanation, you are out of luck. For I too am seeking and questioning, just as you are.

The book of Job is a classic text exploring precisely that question—the suffering of the righteous. Yet the resolution of that dilemma is far from perfect, and could be summed up in a paraphrase of God's own words in Job 38, ‘Who are you to question me?’ Yes, Job eventually was restored by God in the end, and blessed multiple fold, but as I stated already, the process is far from satisfactory, and the result far from perfect.

Our Friday Bible Study group is starting a new unit, on the Book of Tobit in the Apocryphal section, which also explores suffering of the

righteous. Let me just say the resolution of that story has a very interesting take on who God is and what God does. I don't want to spoil it, but do want to invite you to join us, Friday morning at 10 a.m., via teleconference.

Let us return to the sermon, to this great debate of God's blessings and punishments. Jesus enters into the fray, according to the Gospel of Luke, chapter 6. Standing on a 'level place', as opposed to a mountain top, perhaps alluding to the Son of Man coming into the lives of the ordinary people. At that 'level place', Jesus gathers a multitude from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon. What an interesting combination of both Jews and Gentiles as Jesus preaches his 'sermon on the plain'. His opening, similar to that of the Beatitudes in Matthew's Gospel, "Blessed are you who are poor...
Blessed are you who are hungry now...
Blessed are you who weep now...
Blessed are you who are persecuted, or excluded or reviled
or defamed on the account of the Son of Man".

At that point, this is where Luke's account differs from that of Matthew's. No longer just blessings, now replaced by woes:

"But woe to you who are rich...
Woe to you who are full now...
Woe to you who are laughing now...
Woe to you when all speak well of you..."

One thing we need to take note, is that both blessings and woes are not pronounced based on what one does, but based on how one is. Although the structure of these pronouncements from Jesus is eerily similar to that of Deuteronomy and Leviticus, his theological argument is far different. In the coming Kingdom of God envisioned by the Son of God, we are not justified by what we do, we are justified entirely by who we are, and based solely on the grace of God. In that coming Kingdom of God, there is going to be a great levelling. The proud and the powerful are brought low, the poor and the persecuted are raised up. That is good news to some and bad news to others. Those with ears should hear and those with eyes shall see.

Yet, such a description of the good news of Jesus Christ would be incomplete. Blessing or woes, Jesus gives himself to all. He is crucified willingly on a tree, in the shape of the cross, becoming God's instrument of

grace through resurrection, thereby transforming the power of sin and death into a new reality of life where curses are no more. The Book of Revelation paints us that reality through a vision.

In chapter 22:1-2, “Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.”

So those who are faithful, who plant themselves by the water, by that ever flowing and everlasting water of life shall never be fearful nor anxious. I want to leave with you a poem, title “Psalm 1” by Jane Simpson, published in the Christian Century magazine, describing what that faithfulness looks like, to her:

*3 And he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water,
that bringeth forth his fruit in his season;
his leaf also shall not wither;
and whatsoever he doeth shall prosper.*

We go on a Sunday to the old church,
one parent gone in mind, the other weak
in body, though they swap places at will.
It’s homecoming—when the Baptists round up
the past or the young who mow lawns, play golf.
My parents sit close, cloaked in habit, hope.
When they slump their round shoulders and chins down
they both look like they’re sleeping—I can’t tell.
When they stand, they rock, tremble the hymnal
that neither reads, that sways their gravity.
I hear the breathy vocals of lungs, lips—
musty, empty as hot water bottles.
They seem content, at home, here in this place
they know—this place on and above the earth.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.