



THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

Rooted and Resilient

SERMON BY REV. JUNE BARROW ■ APRIL 29, 2018

In the front yard of the very first house my husband and I bought stood a small, newly planted, weeping willow tree. It was scrawny, but we imagined the day when it would be a spreading shade tree. Under its arching branches our future children would play. But when a friend, who is an arborist, visited, he pointed at our willow and said, “Well, that tree is doomed.” “What? No!” we protested. “The soil is wrong,” he said, “and this tree needs water. It should be planted by a river or a lake, not in the middle of an Indiana prairie.” Sure enough, in just a couple of years, the tree withered, my husband cut it down, and we used it for firewood. On this depressing note, let’s begin.

The Hymnbook of the People

The book of Psalms is a collection of 150 prayers and songs, written by a handful of writers over several hundred years, that became the hymnbook of the people of God, both in ancient times and today. These songs, poems and prayers echo off the walls of cathedrals, chapels, and hospital rooms. They’ve been read at coronations, graduations, weddings, and funerals. They comfort, rebuke, warn, and cry out for justice. They are for the repentant, the desperate, the fearful, the joyful, the victorious and the bitter. There is no emotion you could feel that you won’t find expressed in the Psalms.

I once picked up an edited volume of the psalms in a used bookstore. Someone so disliked the emotional honesty of the psalms that they edited out every dark emotion, every cry for God to strike down the enemy. A whole stack of this “improved and corrected” version of

the psalms was marked for clearance. If the psalms are our prayer book, they must express the entire scope of living and praying, our needs, in both good times and hard times.

Blessed

The book of Psalms is very ordered, arranged into five separate books, each of which ends with a statement of praise to God, a doxology. The book also has a clear introduction. The very first word of the very first psalm is *blessed*. Do you recall how Jesus begins the great discourse in Matthew, the Sermon on the Mount? *Blessed* is His first word. Speaking to a great crowd of people, living through all sorts of circumstances in their lives, He tells them first that they are blessed.

Blessed *is* the man

Who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly,

Nor stands in the path of sinners,

Nor sits in the seat of the scornful;

²But his delight *is* in the law of the LORD,

And in His law he meditates day and night.

³He shall be like a tree

Planted by the rivers of water,

That brings forth its fruit in its season,

Whose leaf also shall not wither;

And whatever he does shall prosper.

⁴The ungodly *are* not so,

But *are* like the chaff which the wind drives away.

⁵Therefore the ungodly shall not stand in the judgment,

Nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous.

⁶For the LORD knows the way of the righteous,

But the way of the ungodly shall perish.

Psalm 1:1-6

Many times in the Bible, we read words like *Bless the Lord...* or *Blessed be God ...* But in Jesus' words at the Sermon on the Mount and in the words of this psalm, it goes like this: *Blessed are you.*

To be blessed means to be favored, to be divinely smiled upon. You know what it's like when you see someone you think highly of, and when that person sees you coming, smiles with pleasure, offers you a hand or an arm around the shoulder. They welcome you and clearly want you. That's what blessing is like. To be blessed is to live awake, awake to what God has done and has given. To be blessed is to know the good life, not the easy life, the no-risk life, the always comfortable life, or the no sorrow, no loss life.

Two Choices

Psalm 1 lays out two roads. Humanity is divided according to what they love and what they choose. Who is blessed? "Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor stands in the path of sinners, nor sits in the seat of the scornful..." (Psalm 1:1).

It's a negative statement. It's a progression we understand. Three steps... we walk, we stand, then we settle down and take a seat. The voices of the ungodly never stop talking. They are the folks who will not bow the knee to God's authority, who say that people are smart enough to create their own morality, that freedom means throwing off the shackles of God's wisdom and His law. Everyone gets caught on this path in some way, to some extent. It's a progression. From a walk, to stopping and standing, to discovering that we are sitting with the scornful. It's not hard to understand what that means today when we hear so much that is snarky, sniping, sneering, mocking and scornful. Scorn is marketed, it sells. Scorn is clickbait.

That's one path. But there is another. Blessed is the man whose "delight is in the law of the Lord, and in His law he meditates day and night. He shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that brings forth its fruit in its season, whose leaf also shall not wither; and whatever he does shall prosper." (Psalm 1:2-3)

The other path is to hear the good news God brings to us. We don't have to be the god of our own life; we can know, follow and grow to love God. God has come to us, He has shown us this path of life. We gather to sing and praise, thank and learn, and to worship God.

The people of God seek a truly blessed life. We find it, the psalmist says, when we delight in God. When we want what is good, noble, worthy, and honorable. When we learn from, and are inspired by God's word to be worshipers. When we understand there is something more than what the cynics, critics and scorners say.

Just like our little willow tree was rooted in some kind of soil, so too every human life is. We make choices. We send down a root and attach ourselves into some kind of soil. Where are you rooted? Into what kind of soil are you planting your life?

Resilience

We need roots because we need resilience. We have all faced days when we needed resilience, needed to know that we are rooted. Days when stress rolled in, or sorrow, or we had to face something unthinkable. This is what makes for resilient people. We all know resilient people. People who aren't resilient because they have had simple, easy, unblemished or sinless lives, but people who know the ashes of disappointment, discouragement, failure, mourning, grief, even despair. Yet they are planted by the Lord in the soil of God's love. They grow like oaks, strong and graceful. They have confidence in God, in His wisdom and truthfulness. Confidence in God's character and care for them even in very hard days. These folks show forth the glory of God. Those of you who have endured, or are enduring, are the resilient people the rest of us want to be near.

As a teenager, I was deeply influenced by a woman well into her 80's named Mabel Francis. As a young woman she went by herself as a missionary to Japan. In the early 1930's the mission board ordered her home due to a lack of funds to continue her financial support. In 1941, both the mission board and the State Department ordered her home because of World War II. Both times she chose to stay with the people she loved to serve. She spent World War II in an internment camp in Japan. She only returned home to retire in the 1960's after more than 50 years of service. I heard her speak and had one brief conversation with her. I've never forgotten her. Her life was extraordinary.

Here is another example, a more ordinary life. My friend, Karen, now in her 70's, grew up in a bustling, sometimes chaotic family with lots of children. Mrs. Gordon lived down the street; an empty nester with a beautiful and immaculate home. One summer Mrs. Gordon invited the neighborhood children to come each morning for a week to a backyard Bible club. Each day she would tell them that the last day, Friday, would be a special day. Karen awoke Friday to the rain coming down in buckets, a deluge. She was sure the Bible club would be cancelled because all those wet children would not be allowed in Mrs. Gordon's lovely living room with the white rug. But Mrs. Gordon opened the front door to each child, welcoming them into her home. In the center of the room was an upholstered hassock. She told the children that they could kneel there and pray their own prayer to Jesus. Karen knelt, prayed her own prayer that she would belong to Jesus and she never forgot it and she never forgot Mrs. Gordon. This is the power of a rooted life. It produces a great tree of shelter for others.

The prophet Jeremiah said the same:

Blessed are those who trust in the Lord and have made the Lord their hope and confidence. They are like trees planted along a riverbank, with roots that reach deep into the water. Such trees are not bothered by the heat or worried by long months of drought. Their leaves stay green, and they go right on producing delicious fruit. (Jeremiah 17:7-8)

Rooted in Him

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus told us we are blessed even when circumstances are hard. He told us we are blessed regardless of how we are regarded. He healed, blessed, taught, lived, suffered and died. He defeated death. He knows well what our lives are like. We can root ourselves in Him. The Bible says:

Let your roots grow down into him [Jesus] and draw up nourishment from him, so you will grow in faith, strong and vigorous in the truth you were taught." (Colossians 2:7)

The heroes of the Bible, Moses and Abraham, Esther and Deborah, David and Elijah had hard times, failures, disappointments, periods of waiting and wondering if the Lord had forgotten them. They suffered. But their faith, trust, and confidence was in who God is. That gave them resilience. The world may seem hard and cynical. It may seem at times that the darkness is winning, that those who scorn the Lord hold most of the microphones in this world. But God is always God, always good, perfect, loving and mighty. Over all things He will have the final word and His word is life for us:

May your roots go down deep into the soil of God's marvelous love. And may you have the power to understand, as all God's people should, how wide, how long, how high, and how deep his love really is. May you experience the love of Christ, though it is so great you will never fully understand it. Then you will be filled with the fullness of life and power that comes from God. (Ephesians 3:17b-19)

Rooted

Psalm 1 is a how-to psalm. What does it tell us? Uproot yourself from what is empty or sinful. Perhaps it is one step, one decision. Perhaps it is a marathon of a process. Shake the dirt off some of those pulled up roots. If you need to uproot yourself from conduct, words, choices or patterns that block you, do so. Let someone support you, stand by you, pray with you.

Remember, you are rooted in God's love. God is for you in small ways and in ultimate ways. The heart of God is seen perfectly in the kindness and sacrificial love of Jesus who blessed, healed, helped and who died and rose again on our behalf.

You are rooted in God's power and authority. He is in control. He rules and reigns right now.

You are rooted in the goodness of God. The character of God can be trusted. He has shown us how much He loves us.

You are rooted in the glory of God. Doxology, worship, praise, thanksgiving—this is our language! God has done all things well. He is doing beautiful things.

God's Own Planting

You are God's people, those who have chosen to reverence the Lord, to bow the knee to His authority. You are the blessed people. Blessed when circumstances are easy and when they are hard, blessed when others regard you and when they don't. You are rooting your lives deeply in the truth, wisdom, goodness and power of God. And your deeply rooted lives grow like mighty oak trees.

Those who are growing into their names as God's own planting provide a stabilizing effect to communities when afflictions come. These Oaks of trust in God exude a deep peace that calms those around them. When everything seems to fall apart, they stand firm and solid. Others lean upon them for strength and solace. Such peacefulness cannot be fabricated. It is as organic as a living plant. For this calm arises from a long history of trust in God's faithfulness. (Gerrit Scott Dawson)

That poor little willow tree of ours needed to be planted by streams of water. Planted in that dry, hard prairie ground, it couldn't put down roots. It couldn't thrive and finally it couldn't live. The psalm says the ungodly, those who reject God's right to be God, the scornful and the sneering, will not stand in the end. Their lives become like light chaff that a puff of wind can blow away, like dust. Their roots are not deep enough to hold. The world offers shallow pots and soil that is dry, hard ground.

Plant yourself near the living water that is Jesus. Meditate on God's law, the psalm says. What will you find if you meditate on God's law? That the heart of the Bible's message is the gospel and the gospel is God's good news about Jesus. The entire Old Testament, with the sacrifices offered over and over, points ahead to the cross, the true sacrifice. And the entire New Testament points back to the cross and the empty tomb. The single message of the Christian

church, in all times and all places, is this gospel: Jesus died, that He rose, that He came for us, He claimed us and we belong to Him. Done. Paid. Finished. Final. It's such good news!

Jesus made it radically clear when He said, "You search the Scriptures because you think they give you eternal life. But the Scriptures point to me!" (John 5:39) Every Bible story whispers His name. As one writer says, God loves you with a never stopping, never giving up, unbreaking, always and forever love.

Our Choice

Our little weeping willow tree had no choice about where it was planted. Someone else made that decision. But you and I have choices. We choose where to plant our lives, where to put down our roots.

Psalm 1 introduces us to the truth that there are two paths in this life. We choose according to what we love and desire. The whole message of the Bible is to choose life, choose blessing, choose God. God does overcome. He shall reign forever and ever. He does have the final word. The final actions will be His. He has shown us His love in the person and life of Jesus. He can be trusted. His word is true.

So how does the book of Psalms end? What is the conclusion? What are the final words of the final psalm? "Let everything that has breath praise the Lord!" (Psalm 150:6). And so, we, as the people of God, say, "Praise the Lord!" ■